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Flexible Overlay: Unearthing Potential at the Nebraska State Fair Park

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Flexible Overlay: Unearthing Potential at the Nebraska State Fair Park

by

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The Nebraska State Fair Park is utilized to its full extent for only eleven days in the fall when the annual State Fair takes place. For the remaining fifty weeks of the year, the vast outdoor space sits vacant and underutilized. The Fair "Park," as it is called, is not a park at all—as a collection of empty buildings and useless lots, it offers little possibility for recreational use by members of the surrounding community. Not only does the current layout fail to encourage seasonal activities, it does not provide optimal support for the State Fair itself. Buildings have been erected over the years on an ad hoc basis, resulting in a plan that lacks coherence and provides the visitor with no sense of orientation. My project seeks to address this problem through a rigorous analysis of programmatic organization resulting in a new master plan that supports year-round activities.

During the initial stages of my project, I considered the existing conditions of the site as a graphic composition of points, lines and planes supporting a multitude of overlapping functions. I used graphic compositions as a tool for understanding the site, diagnosing problems and formulating design solutions. I analyzed the current organization of the State Fair Park with particular emphasis on its visual impact on the landscape. With this is mind, I began to develop three-dimensional transformations of the site through ventilated paper drawings. The drawings allowed me to manipulate the site as a single entity—a surface—as opposed to an assemblage of smaller, disconnected parts. This stage of the process was key in achieving a comprehensive solution for the site that addressed the visual and programmatic issues diagnosed in the previous analysis.

To solve the problems of the Nebraska State Fair Park, I approached the master plan not as a rigid, specifically-designed collection of buildings on a site, but as a flexible landscape that offers the possibility of various activities throughout the year. Buildings are treated as topography—folded into the landscape—as opposed to objects on the landscape. Following the trace of the original 1891 plan, a raised platform spans the park allowing activities to take place above and below. It supports multiple functions from season to season: during the fair, it elevates the midway and provides orientation (birds-eye view); in the warmer months it becomes part of a trail system, and functions as a sledding hill during the winter. A loose infrastructure is provided in the form of roads, footpaths and paving on the southern half of the site to support seasonal activities that require structure and organization. The northern half of the site, which is bounded by Salt Creek, is divided by undulating strips of land that provide anchoring for a range

of activities, including soccer fields, skate ramps, Frisbee fields and picnic areas. This portion of the site is not strictly designed for a particular program, but strategically formed to maximize flexibility and activity.

Ultimately, the development of this project is as significant as the final product. It began as an exploration of process, with the only aim being to gain an understanding of the site through various methods of analysis. Rather than serving as a means to an end, the process became an end in itself. The result is more than a master plan for Nebraska State Fair Park; it reclaims a role for landscape in the architecture of event.

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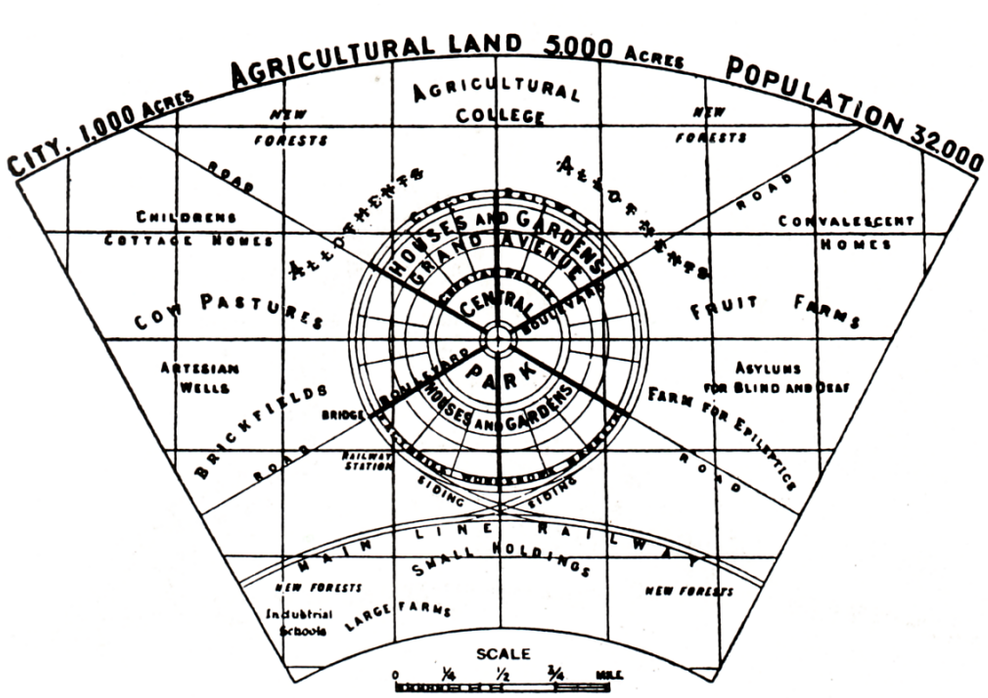
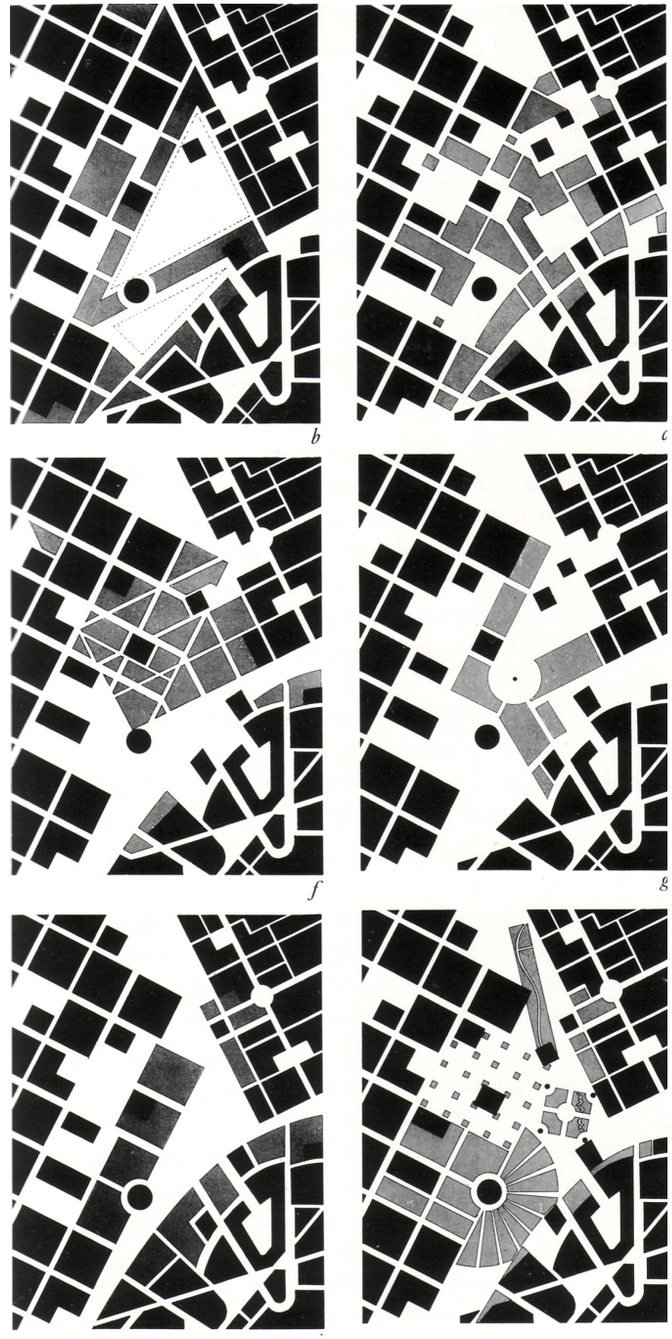
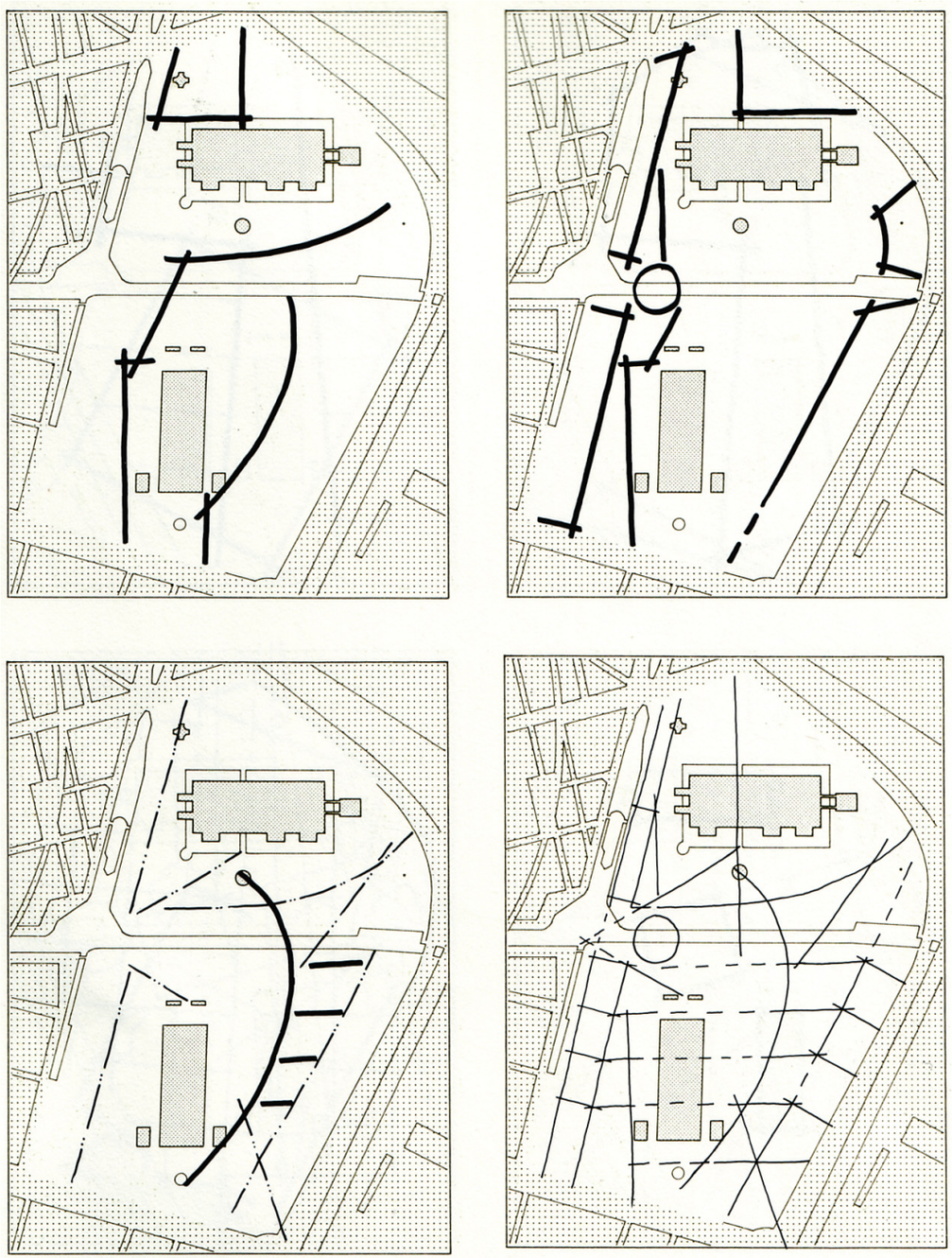
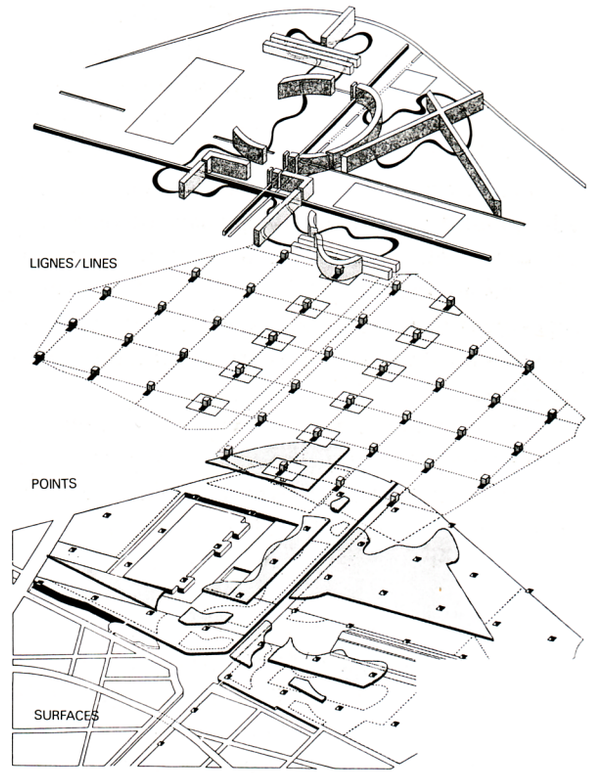


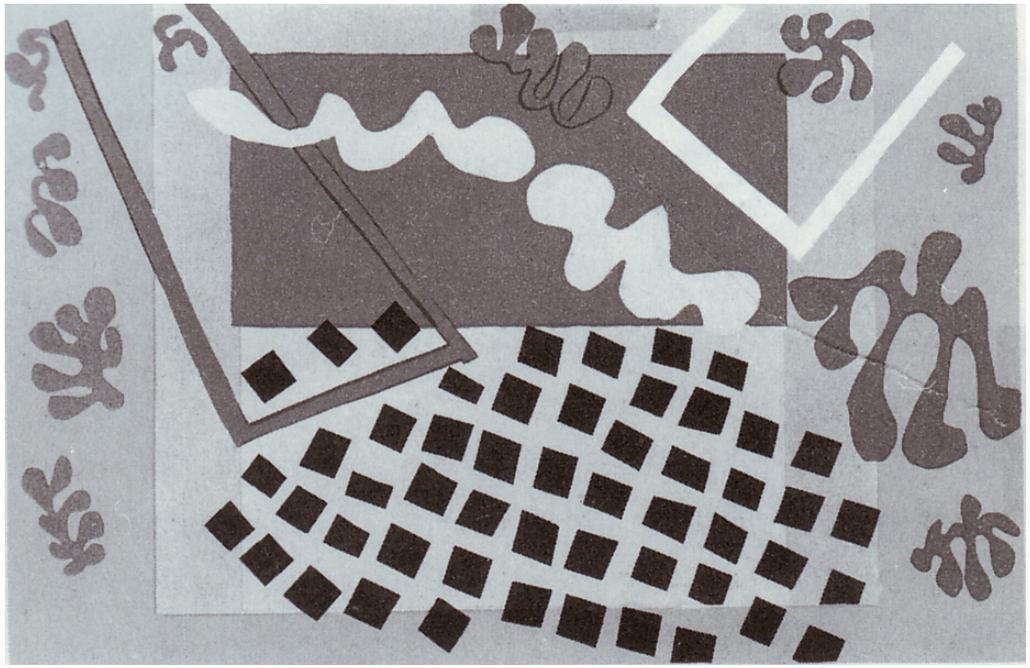


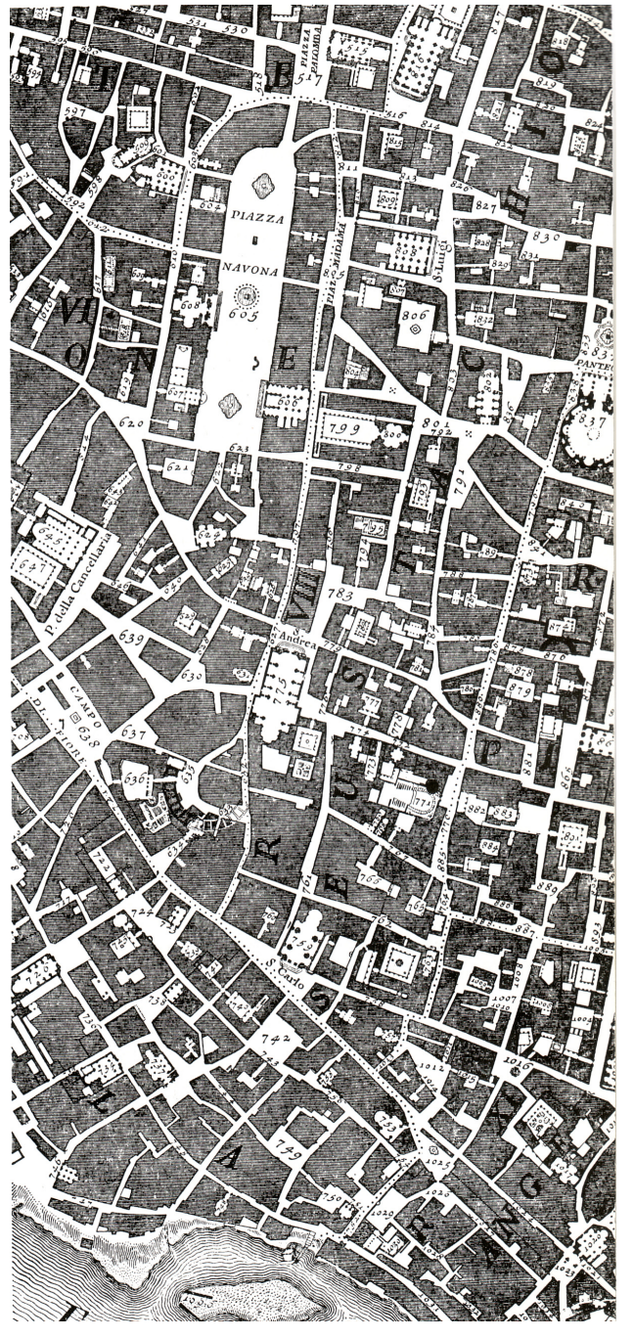
Left: Ebenezer Howard, diagram of garden city, 1898. Illustrates programmatic relationships without suggesting scale or form. Right: Beune and Thus, design principles. Various strategies for spatial fragmentation of urban open space.





Left: Hiroshi Hara's submission for Parc de la Villette analyzed as a graphic composition of surfaces and intersections. Right: Bernard Tschumi, layered drawing of Parc de la Villette, 1983.





Left: Henri Matisse, Les codonas, 1947. Free-form collage. Right: Giambattista Nolli, map of Rome, 1748. Ichnographic map showing public urban spaces as well as building interiors.

The Nebraska State Fair Park is located three miles south of I-80 on 27th Street in Lincoln, Nebraska. Bordered by Salt Creek on the north and Burlington Northern Railroad on the south, the 250 acres of land has been the site of the Nebraska State Fair for more than a century.

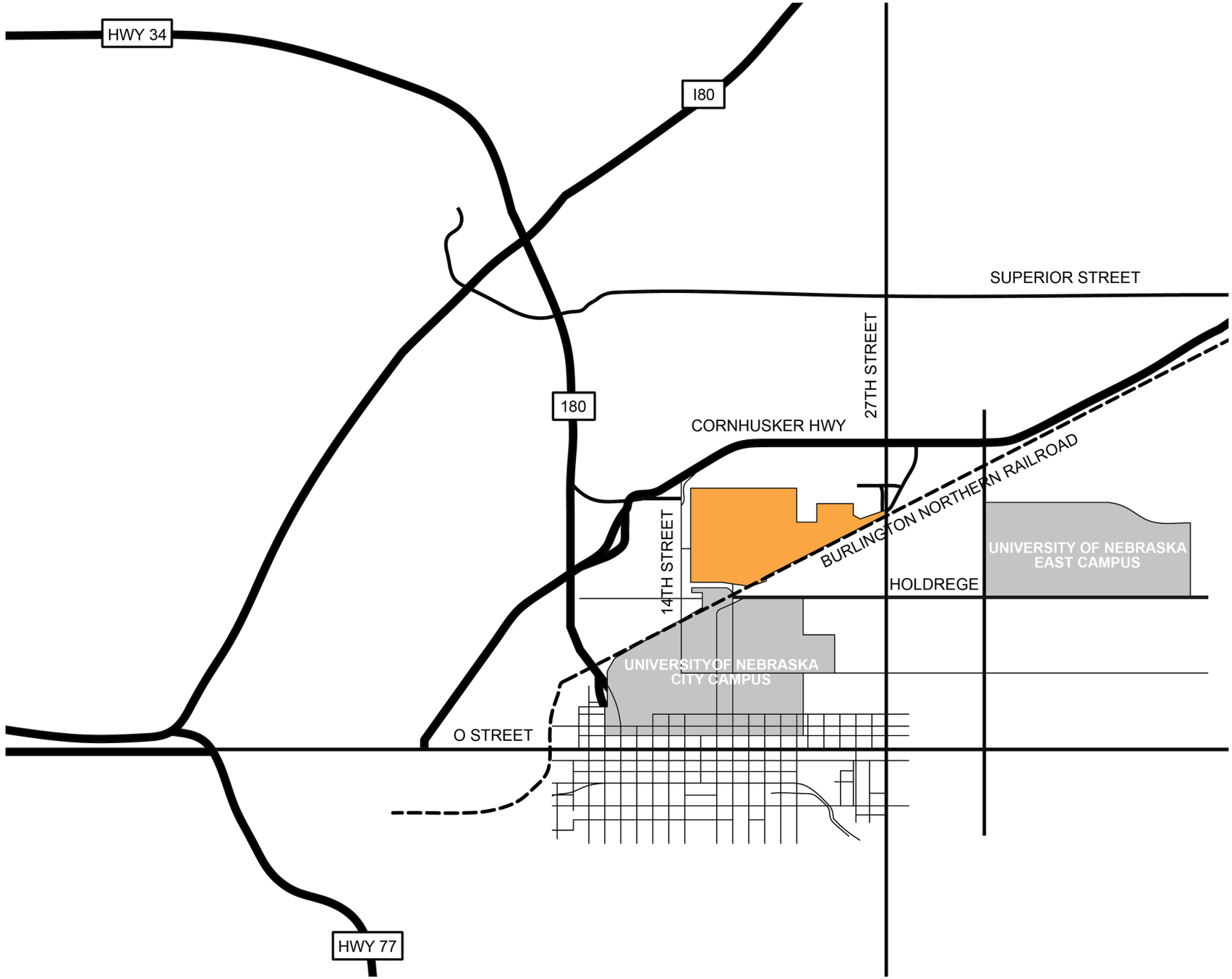
Currently, the site is scattered with buildings that exist to support the State Fair. Only nine of the sixty buildings are used consistently throughout the year, leaving dozens of abandoned buildings during the off-season. Aside from a few sporting events and private functions, the park is mostly empty for the majority of the year. The haphazard plan seems to have been designed solely for the State Fair, with little or no consideration for year-round events.

During the two weeks of the State Fair, the site is transformed by a sudden population of nearly 300,000 fairgoers. More than fifty food vendors bring in portable stalls, along with commercial vendors and various community, art and agriculture exhibits. Three outdoor stages hold performances throughout the day, including children's pageants, comedic acts and rock concerts. The typically empty barns are filled with hogs, cows, horses and sheep, and the ice skating rink in the Coliseum is covered with dirt to be used for rodeos. Within a matter of days, the park is transformed from a virtual ghost town to a lively and densely populated destination.

After the festivities, the State Fair Park abruptly returns to its previous state, forgotten until the next Nebraska State Fair.

Nebraska State Fair Park; during the fair and off-season.

Nebraska State Fair Park; aerial view.



Nebraska State Fair Park; context map.

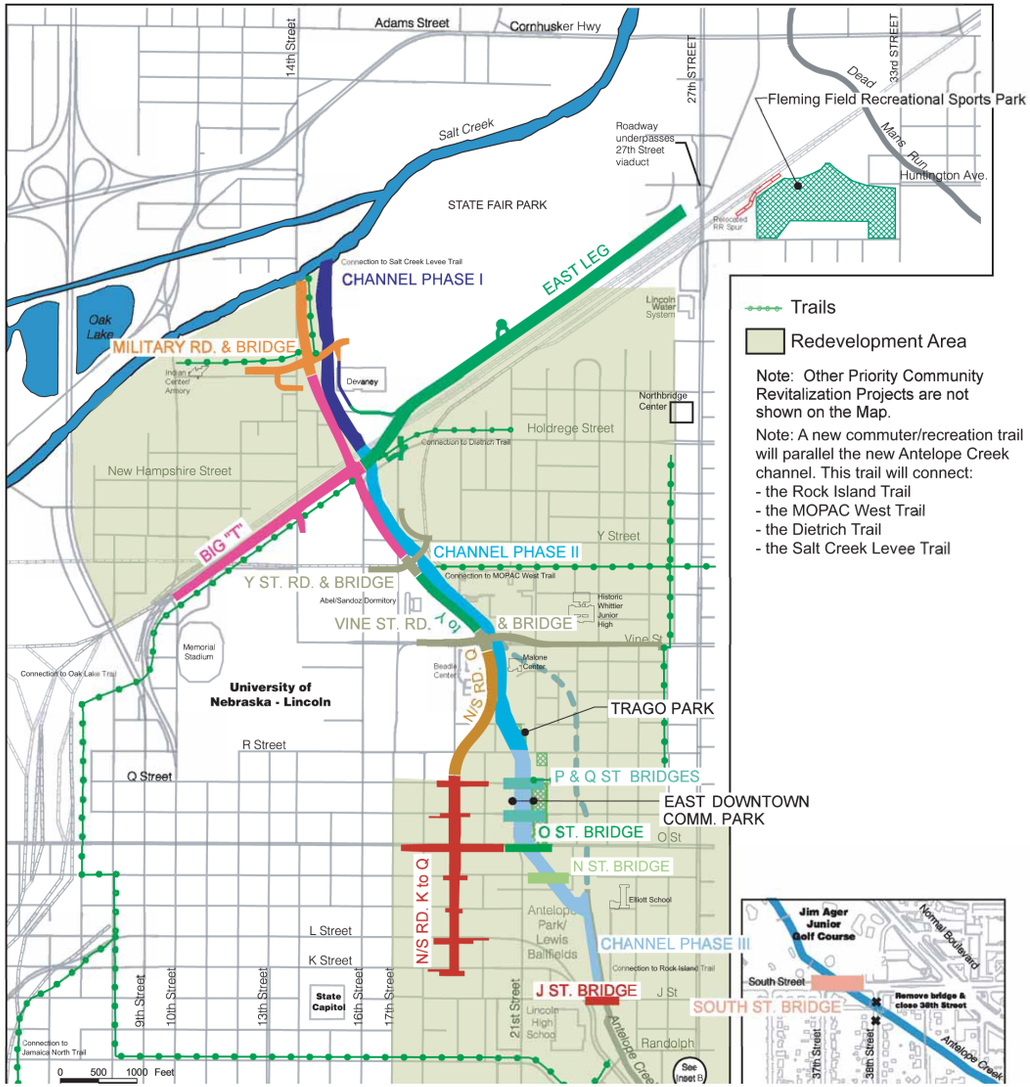
Antelope Valley Projects

Community Revitalization • Stormwater Management • Transportation Improvements

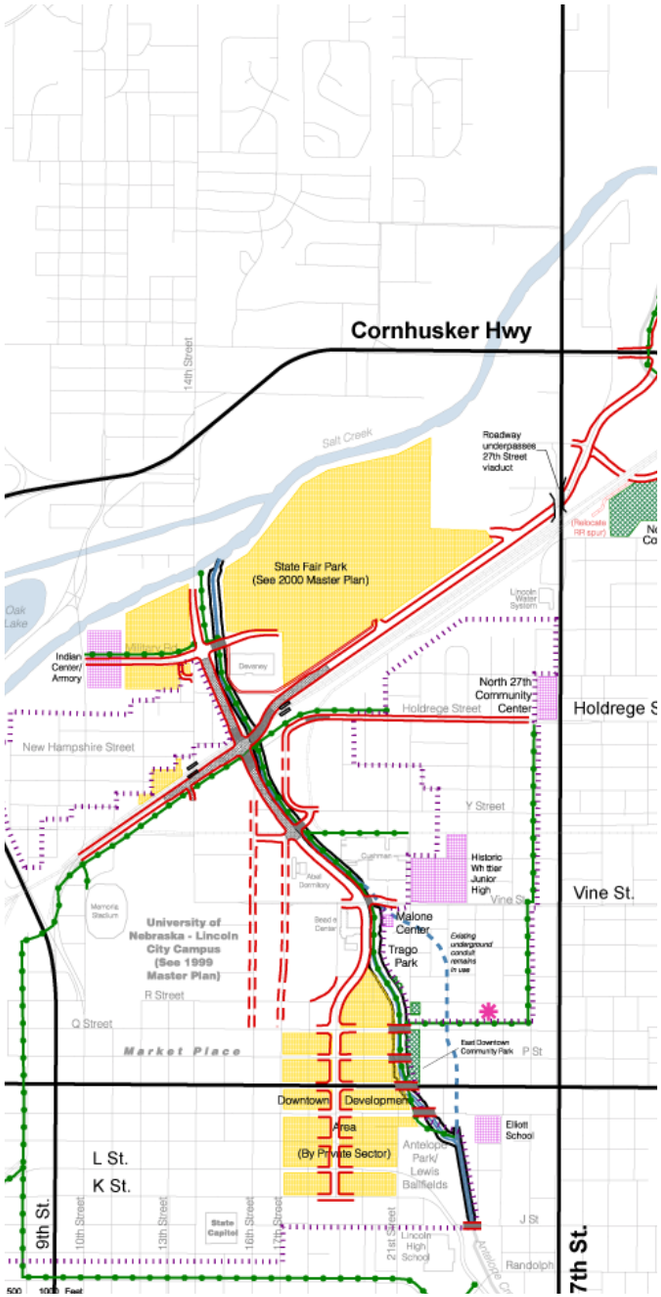
Joint Antelope Valley Authority (JAVA)

- University of Nebraska - Lincoln
- Lower Platte South Natural Resource District
- City of Lincoln, Nebraska

Priority Project Limits



The Antelope Valley Project will impact the Nebraska State Fair Park in several ways. A new four-lane roadway will bridge over the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad, connecting to 14th Street west of the Bob Devaney Center. The railway crossing at 14th Street near the south entrance to the Fair Park will be replaced by a pedestrian underpass and a four-lane overpass. A new entrance has been designed on the west side of the Fair Park, and another will be added on the southeastern side. A bike trail will extend into the park from the south, connecting the State Fair Park to Lincoln's four main bike trail systems. Ultimately, the Antelope Valley Project will allow better pedestrian and vehicular traffic from downtown Lincoln and the university campus.

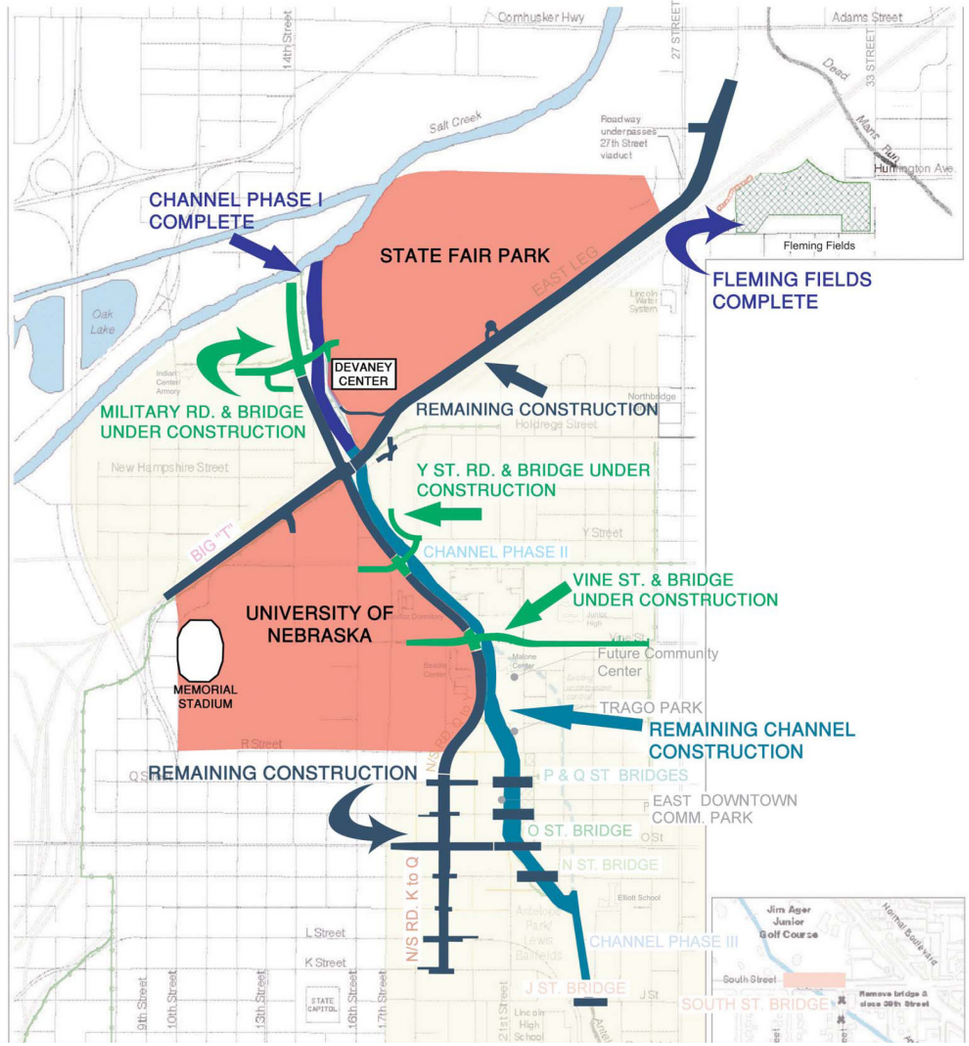


Antelope Valley Projects

Community Revitalization • Stormwater Management • Transportation Improvements

Priority Project Limits

- COMPLETED PROJECTS
- UNDER CONSTRUCTION
- REMAINING CONSTRUCTION
- REMAINING CHANNEL CONSTRUCTION



The map to the right shows the State Fair Park as it is used during the Nebraska State Fair. Rides and food are central to the plan and consume a large portion of the site. Commercial vendors also occupy a large area, followed by agricultural and art exhibits. The racetrack, while apparently prominent in the site plan, is hardly noticeable from inside the park. The Bob Devaney Center, located near the south entrance, is filled with art exhibits and commercial vendors during the fair.

Although the existing park is used for the Nebraska State Fair, it lacks the organization and infrastructure necessary for optimal support. Activities of the State Fair are situated within the current layout as well as possible—and the result is not ideal.

The existing plan is problematic in many ways when it comes to the fair. Similar attractions, such as agriculture exhibits, are forced to be dispersed from one end of the park to the other. Crowds are distributed unevenly throughout; the midway, for instance, is so congested that one can hardly move, while boulevards just around the corner are completely empty. Events that are forced into enclosed spaces, such as the art and photography exhibits, are isolated from the rest of the fair.

The existing buildings inconveniently divide the landscape and block extended views. Due to the excessive number of buildings and the general lack of organization, fairgoers may find it difficult to orient themselves within the park.

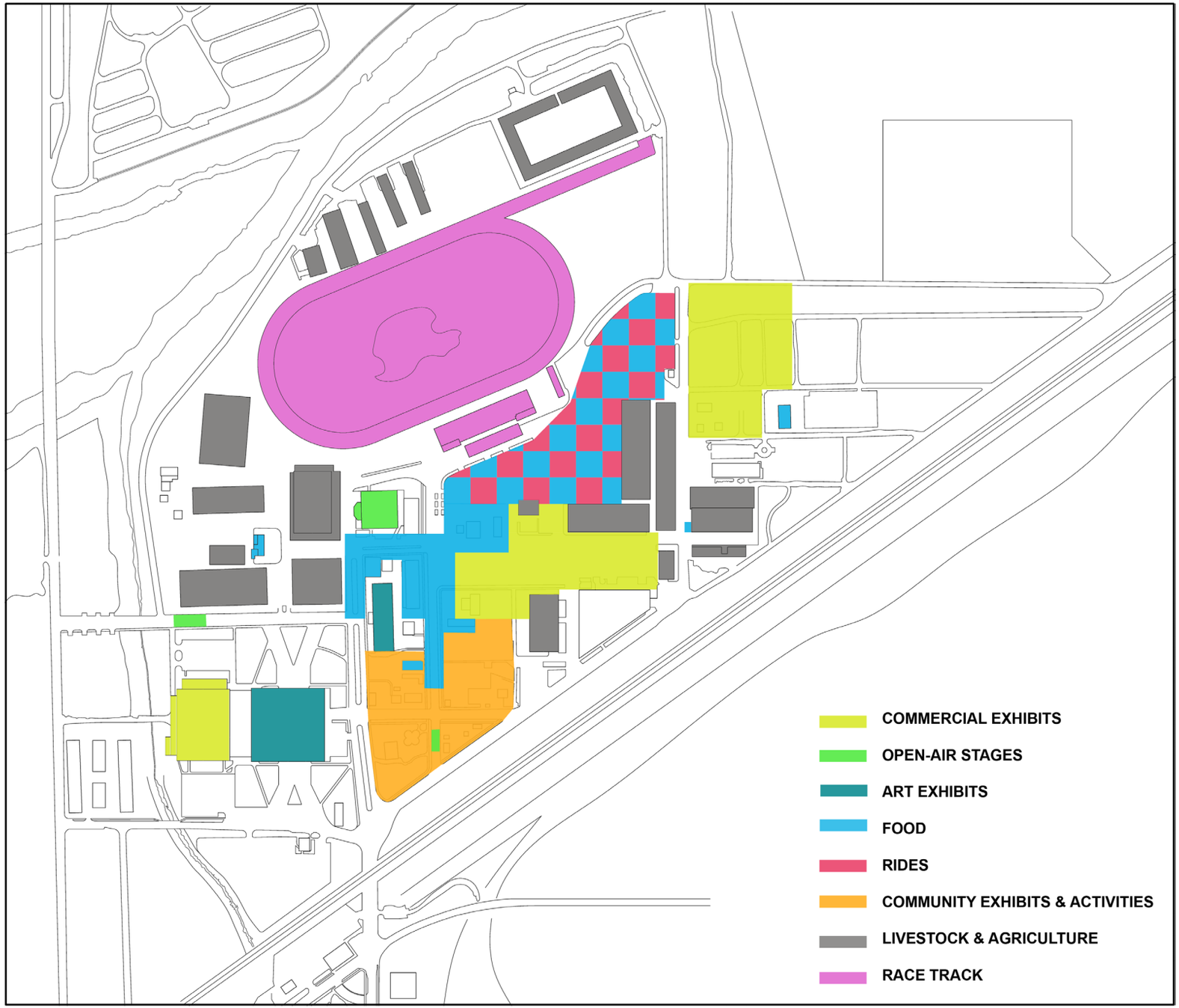
Major Observations:

1. **Activities within enclosed spaces become isolated from the fair.**

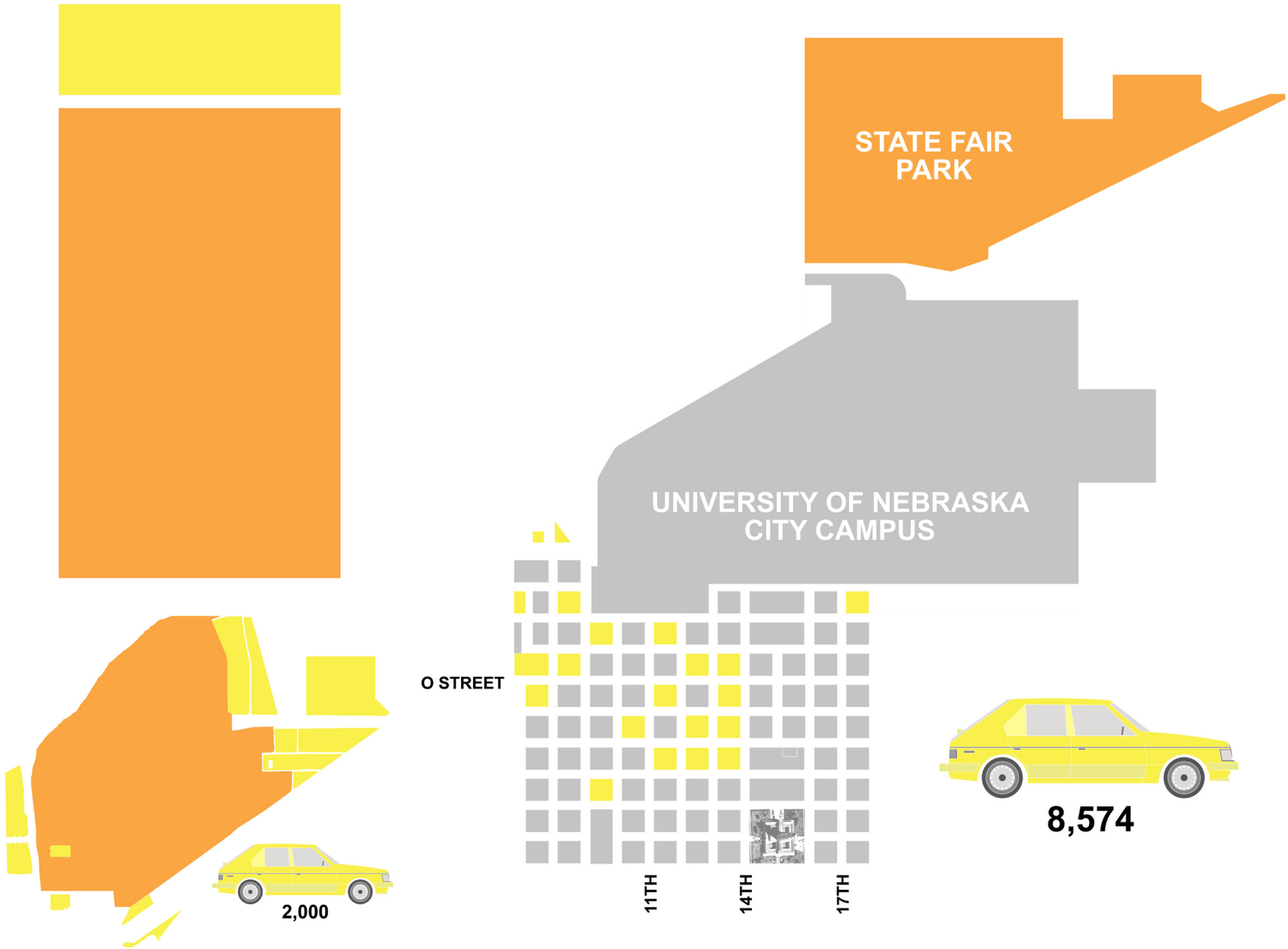
2. **Crowds are concentrated at the midway, particularly around the food vendors.**

3. **Activities are not grouped efficiently.**

4. **Fairgoers lack sense of orientation.**



Nebraska State Fair Park; activities map.



Parking diagrams.

Parking lots at the east entrance.

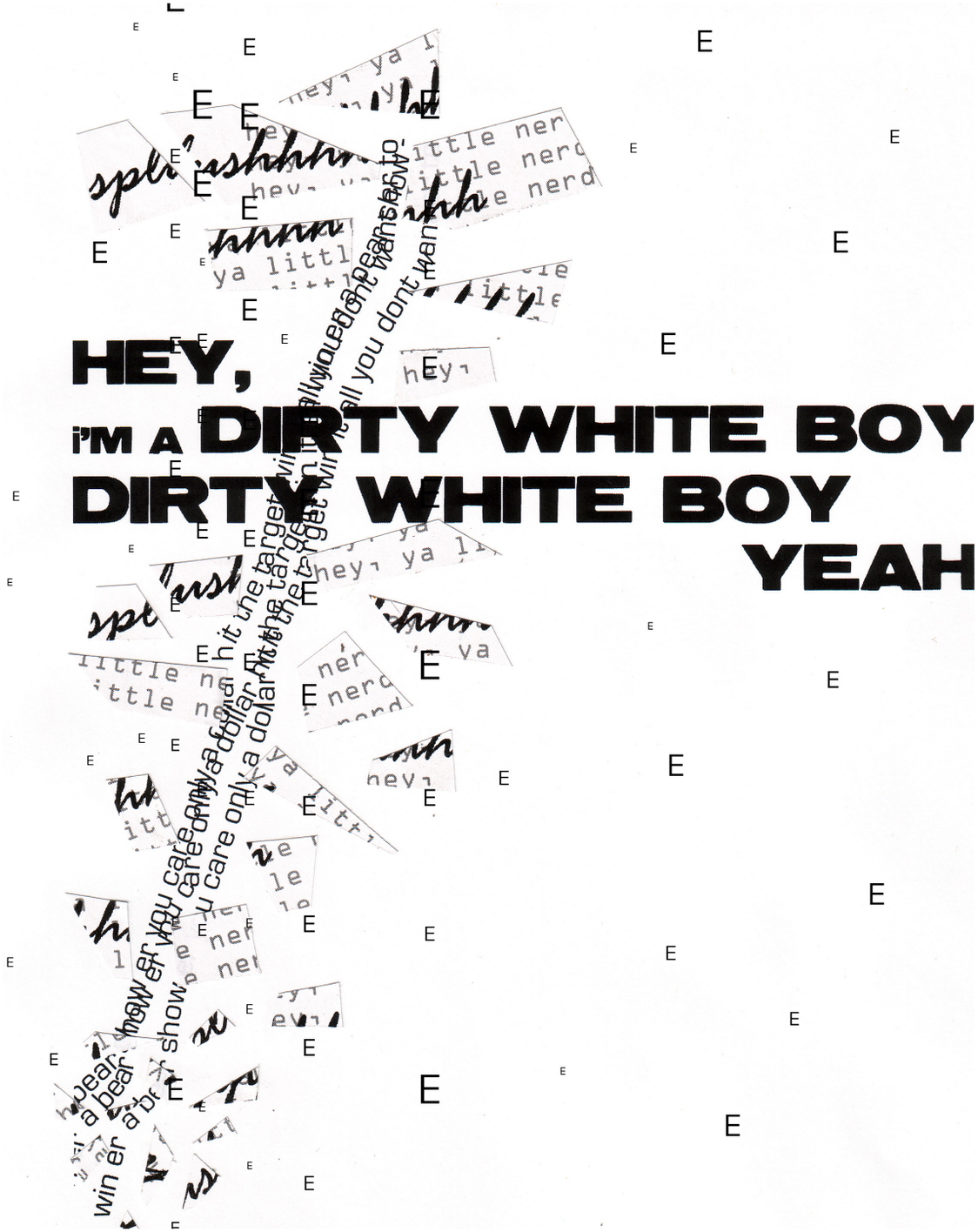
Midway parking lot; off-season.

Contrasting views of the State Fair Park on- and off-season.

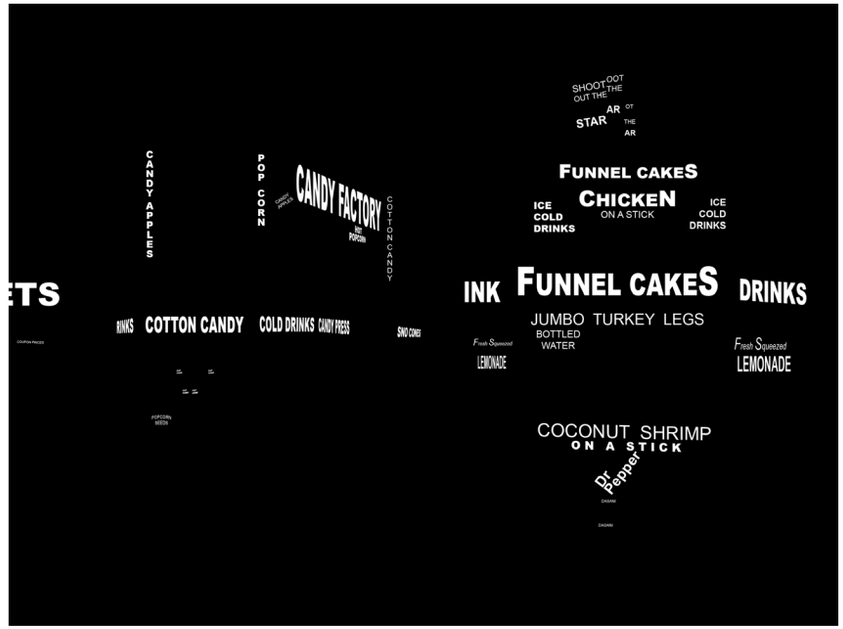
Although the current layout of the Nebraska State Fair Park creates certain obstacles for the functioning of the fair, what happens in the off-season is a much bigger problem. The so-called “off season” is more than fifty weeks long, yet it has been ignored in the plan of the park. When the fair ends, buildings are closed up and parking lots are emptied. Carnival rides and food stalls are cleared from the midway to expose a vast, barren parking lot. The landscape of abandoned buildings is not a welcoming scene; in fact, it causes one to feel as if they are trespassing on private property.

The parking lot near the grandstand is transformed for the Nebraska State Fair.


COTTON CANDY
COLD DRINKS
MYSTERY MUSEUM
TWO HEADED KID
LOOK
GIANT SNAKE
ALIVE

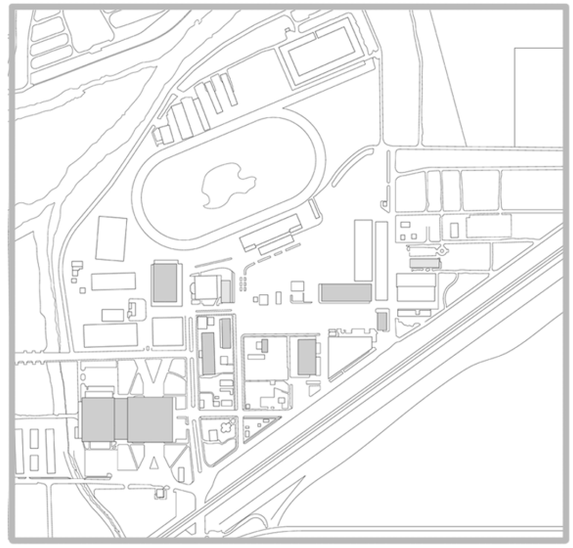


This word diagram illustrates my experience of the midway on a Saturday night, surrounded by the sounds of carnival rides and rock music, the shouting of vendors and the chatter of the crowd. It captures the lively atmosphere of the fair; an aspect of the site that could not be expressed through conventional diagrams.

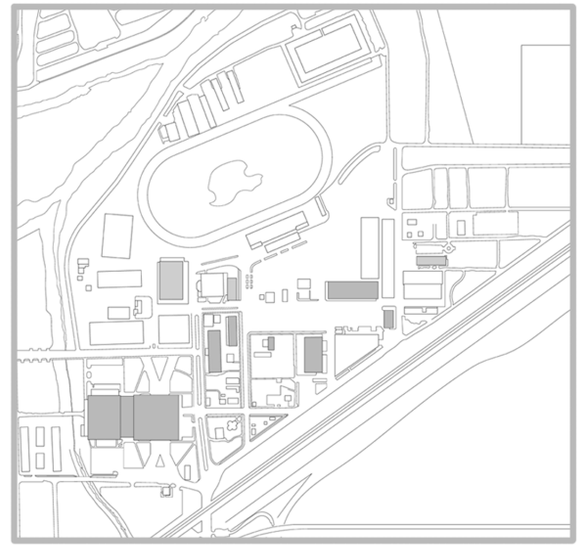


Midway by night. Lighted signs of the concession stands illuminate the midway.

January



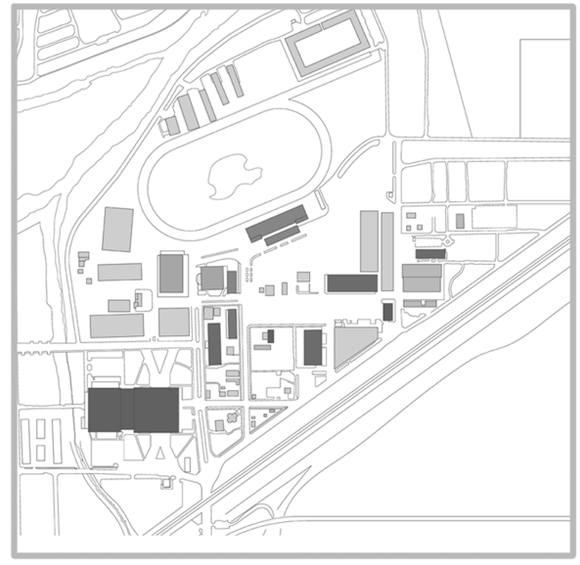
February



March

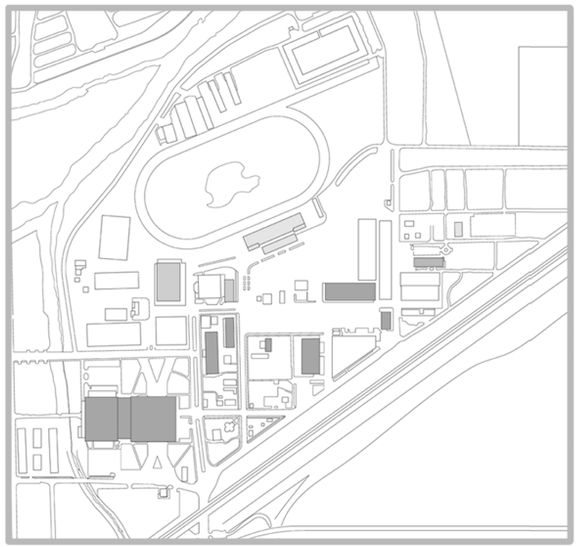
July

August



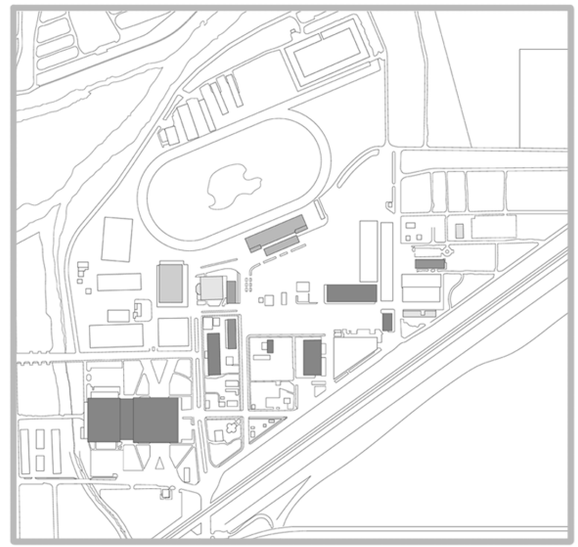
September

Use diagram. Only a handful of buildings are used consistently throughout the year; the majority of buildings are used only once for the State Fair.



April

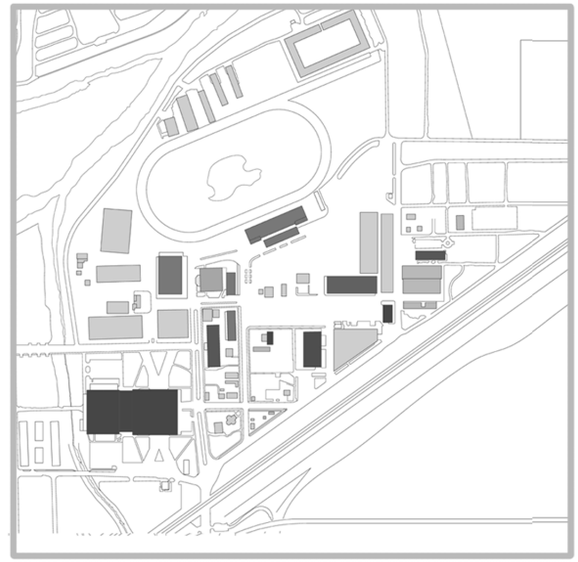
May



June

October

November



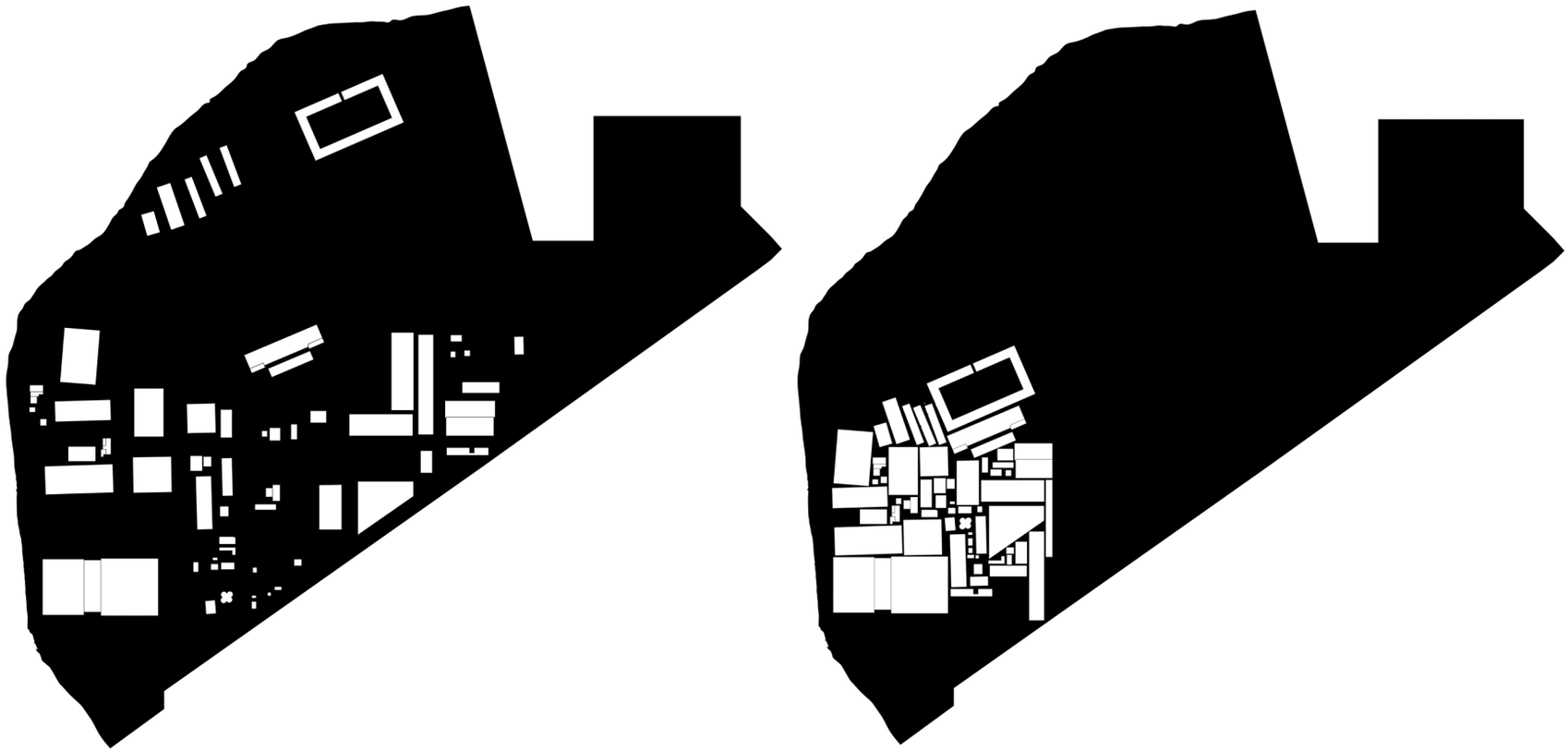
December

The following pages contain organizational solutions for the Nebraska State Fair Park. Through the use of diagrams, collages and ventilated drawings, I manipulated the programmatic and visual aspects of the existing site to create a landscape that could be enjoyed throughout the year. These proposals address various problems identified in the previous analysis.

The first diagrams, for instance, focus on the excessive number of buildings on the site and their visual and functional impact on the landscape. It would not be a plausible solution to cluster the existing buildings as shown; rather, these conceptual diagrams highlight the amount of space that could potentially be available for other activities.

The next set of diagrams propose various scenarios for expanding the unbuilt space within the park. Based on the conclusion that enclosed spaces hinder the activities of the fair and stifle the landscape in the off-season, it is suggested that certain buildings be eliminated to create spacious, uninterrupted boulevards.

Each of the following proposals represents an important step in understanding the organization of the park, and therefore is key in the formulation of the final solution.



Consolidating the existing buildings might increase activity levels during the fair. It would also open a larger portion of the park for off-season activities.

Arranging the facilities according to when and how often they are used could increase efficiency. The area of the park could expand and contracct to support various activities.

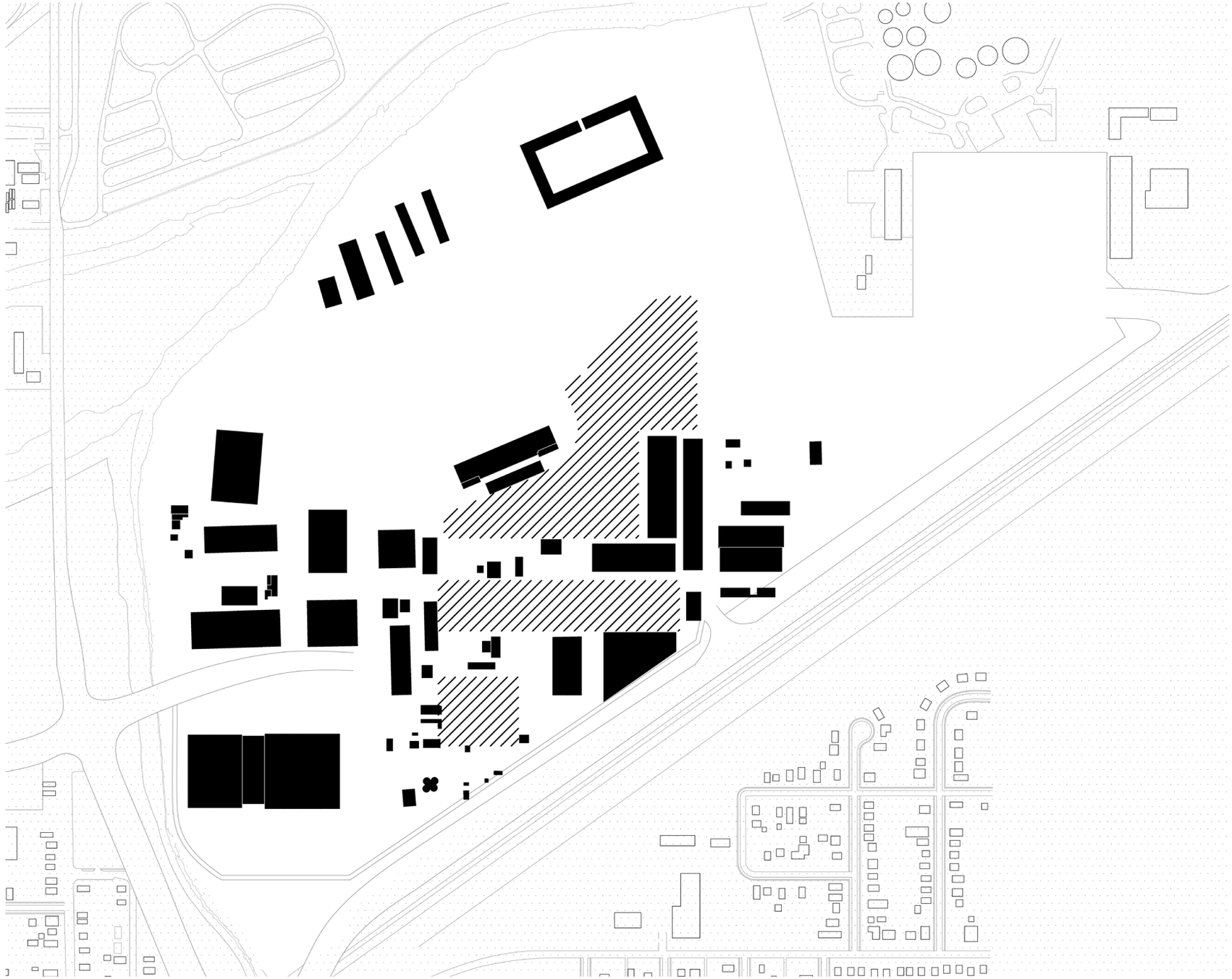


Existing unbuilt areas in the State Fair Park.

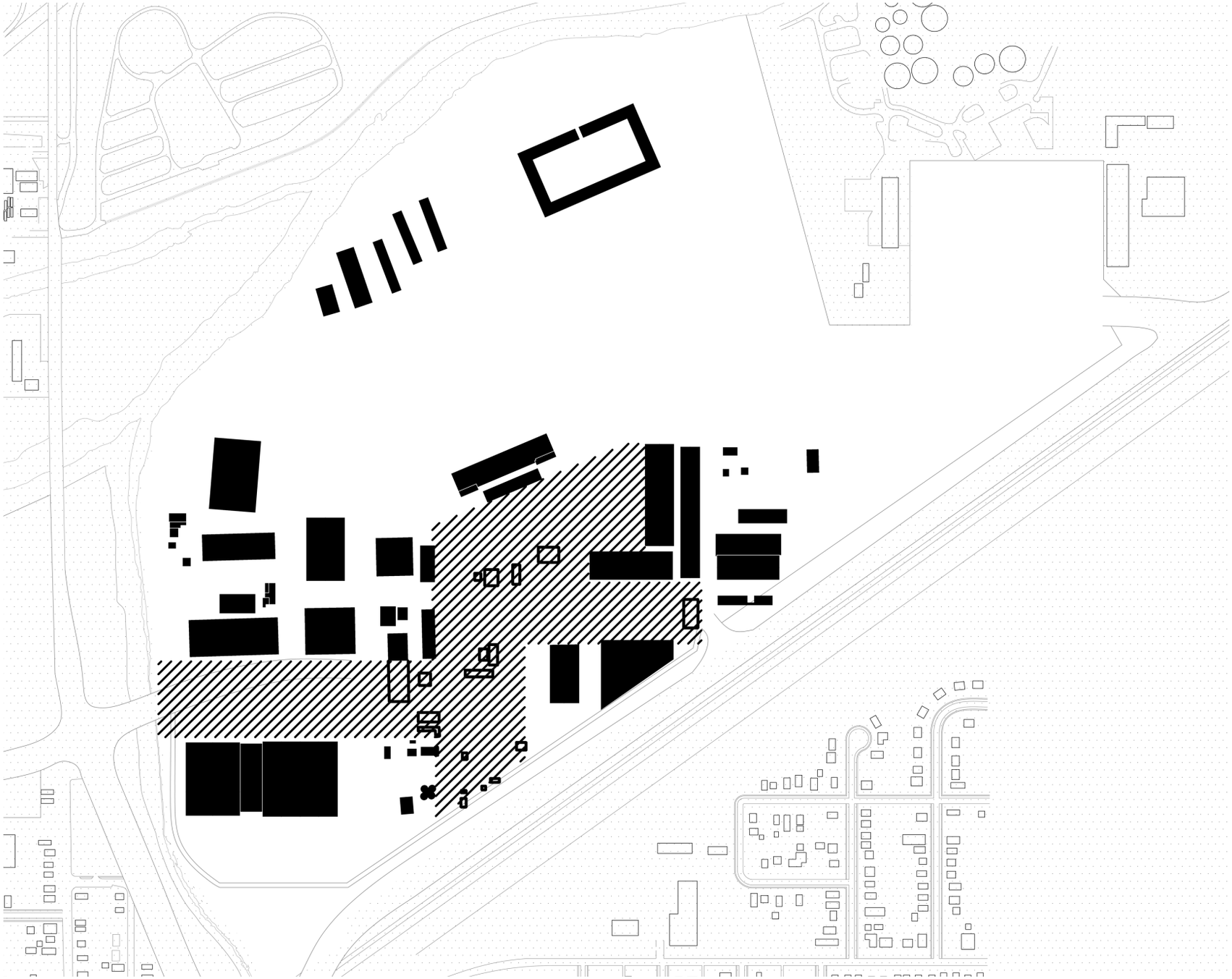
The images above show the three existing unbuilt spaces in the State Fair Park. These areas adapt most successfully to the activities of the State Fair, providing flexible space for food and commercial vendors, entertainment, carnival rides and youth activities. It is within these large, open spaces that one can best experience the atmosphere of the fair—they are lively, bustling places filled with the aroma of food, lights of the midway and the chatter of the crowd.

The pair of images on the left show the middle lot just south of the midway. During the fair, this area is used for individual commercial stalls. The images in the center show the smaller green space further south, which is used for youth activities during the fair.

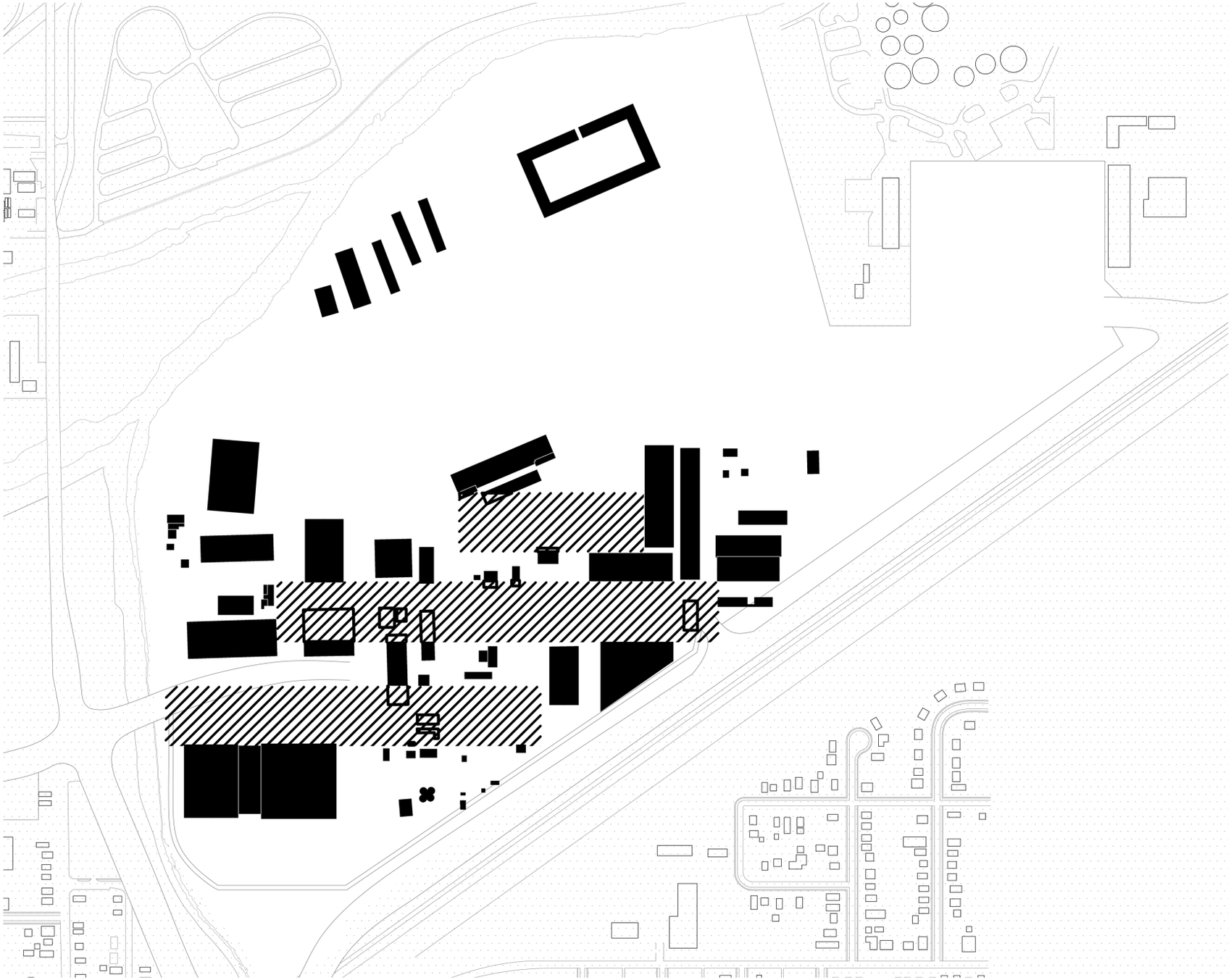
The images on the far right show the largest parking lot near the grandstand, which is occupied by the carnival rides of the midway.



Three separate unbuilt areas exist within the State Fair Park.

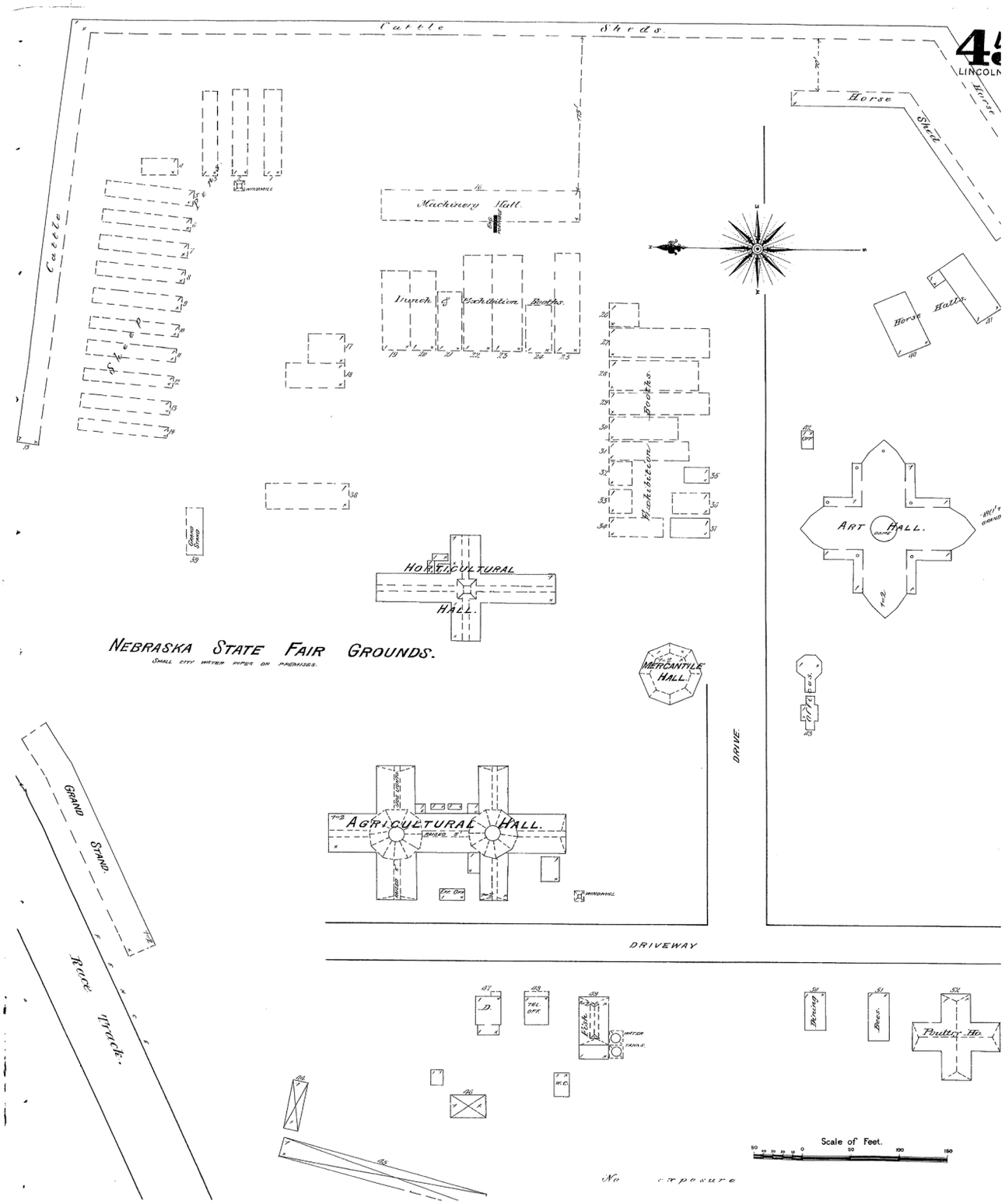


The three unbuilt areas could be connected to improve movement throughout the park.



The unbuilt areas could be elongated and treated as boulevards.

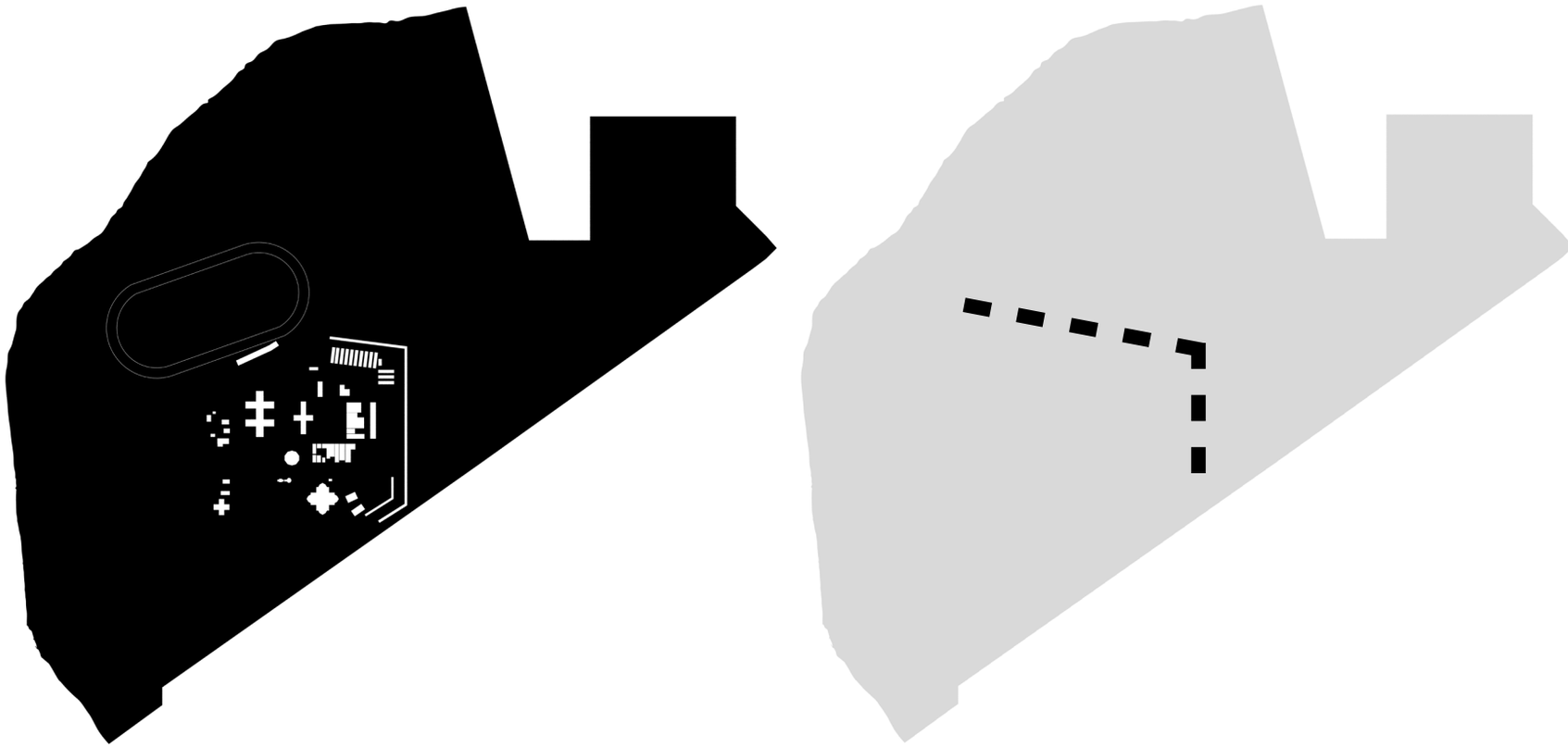
The unbuilt area could be expanded to connect the two main entrances.



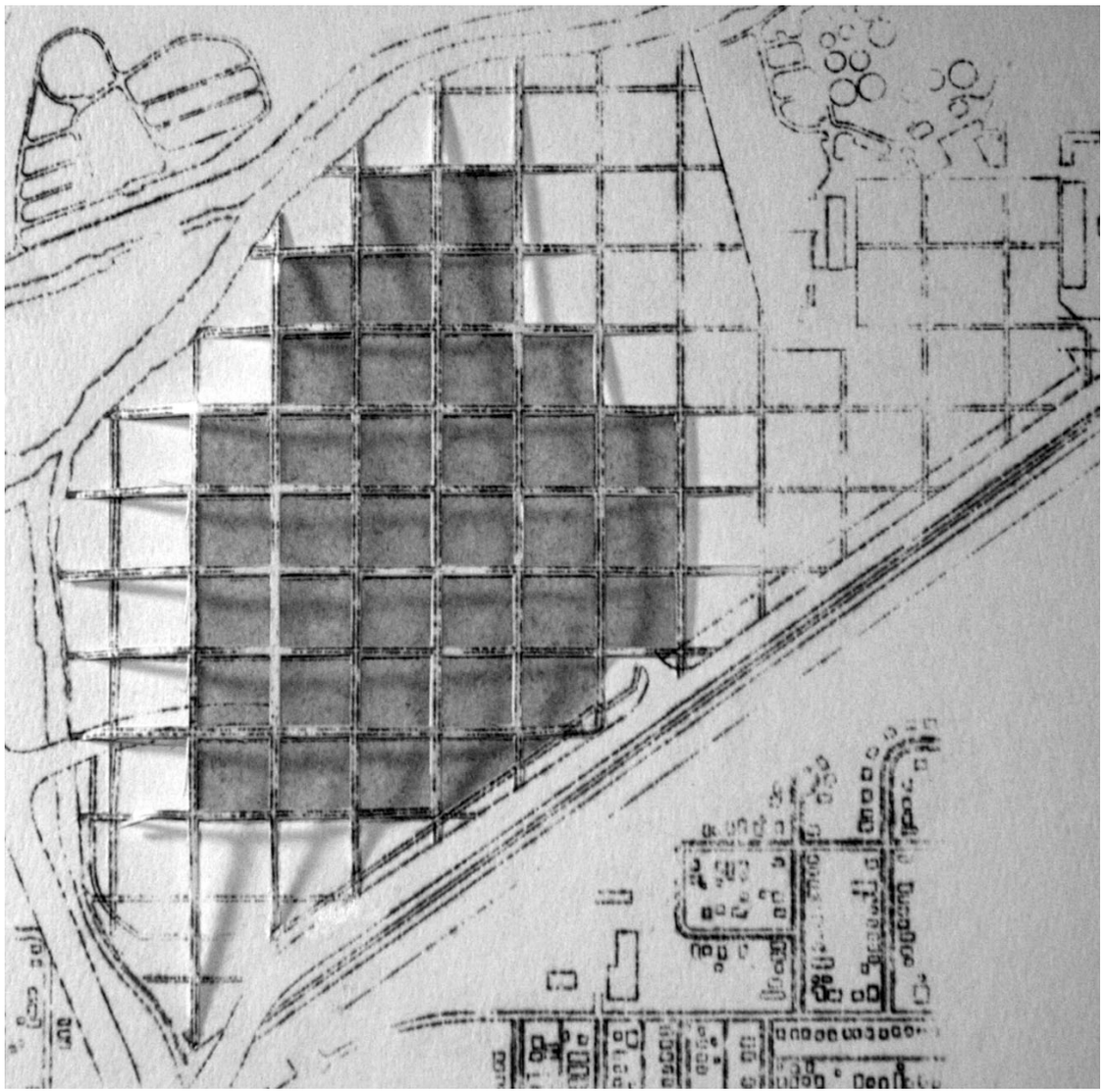
NEBRASKA STATE FAIR GROUNDS.

SMALL CITY WATER PIPES ON PREMISES.

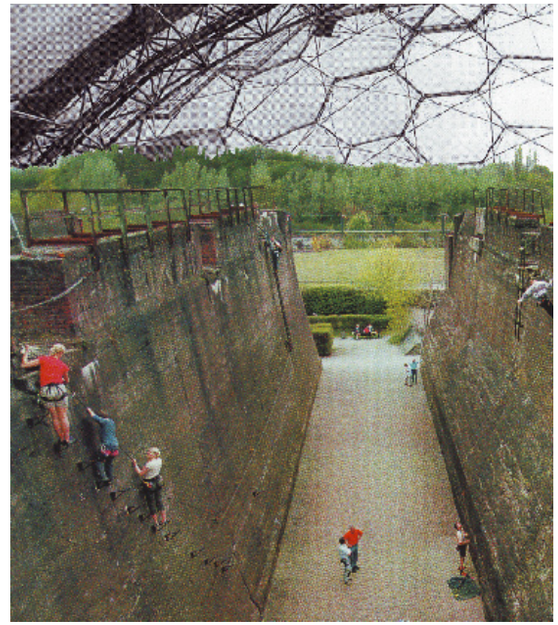
1891 Sanborn Map of the Nebraska State Fair Park.



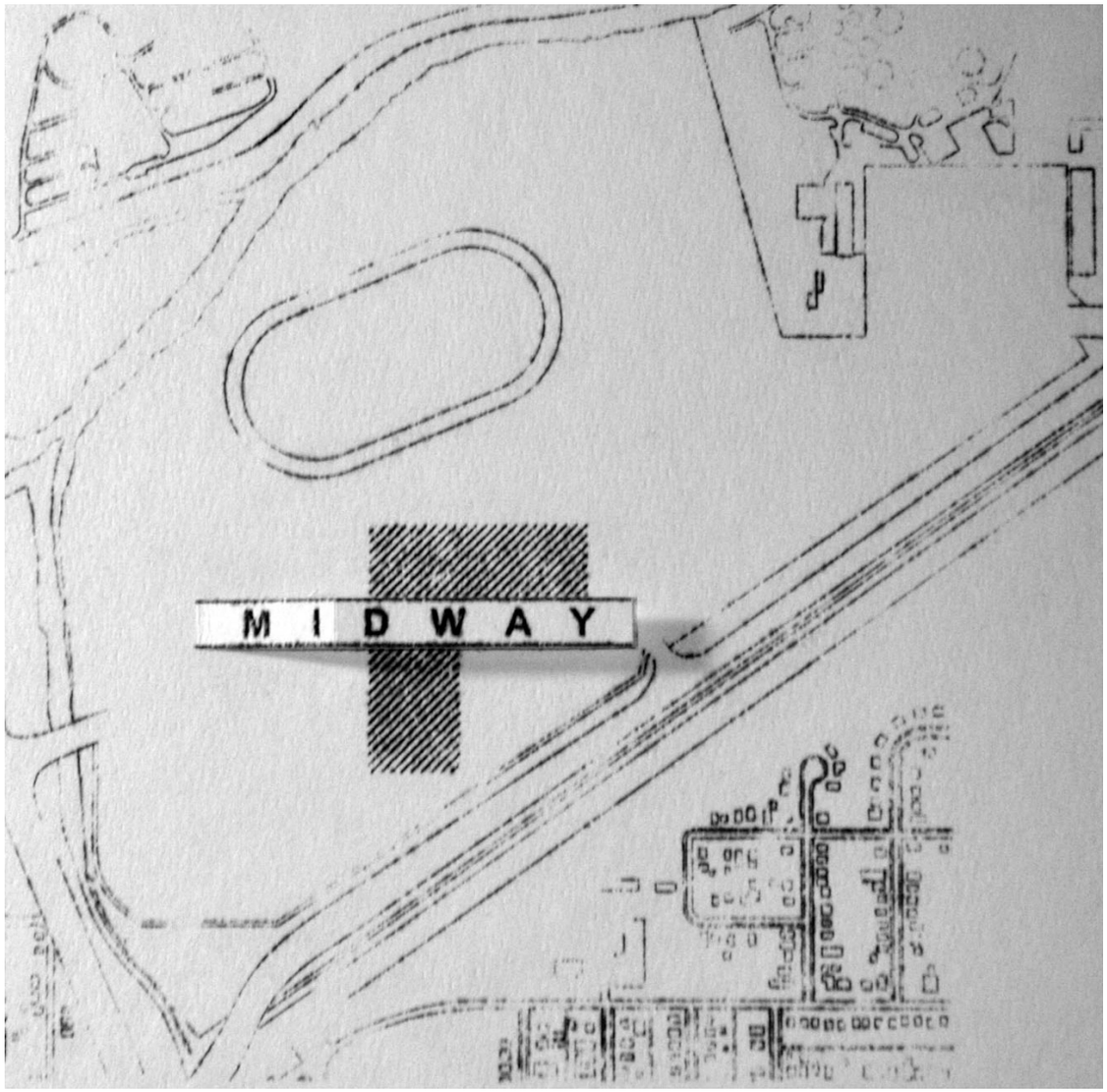
The trace of the 1891 cattle barns, which originally bounded the State Fair Park, becomes the central element of the new plan.



The initial concept for a formal intervention was to cover the entire landscape with a large structure. This would control the climate and protect against harsh weather, allowing people to use the park throughout the year. Enclosing the site, however, might further isolate the park from members of the surrounding community.

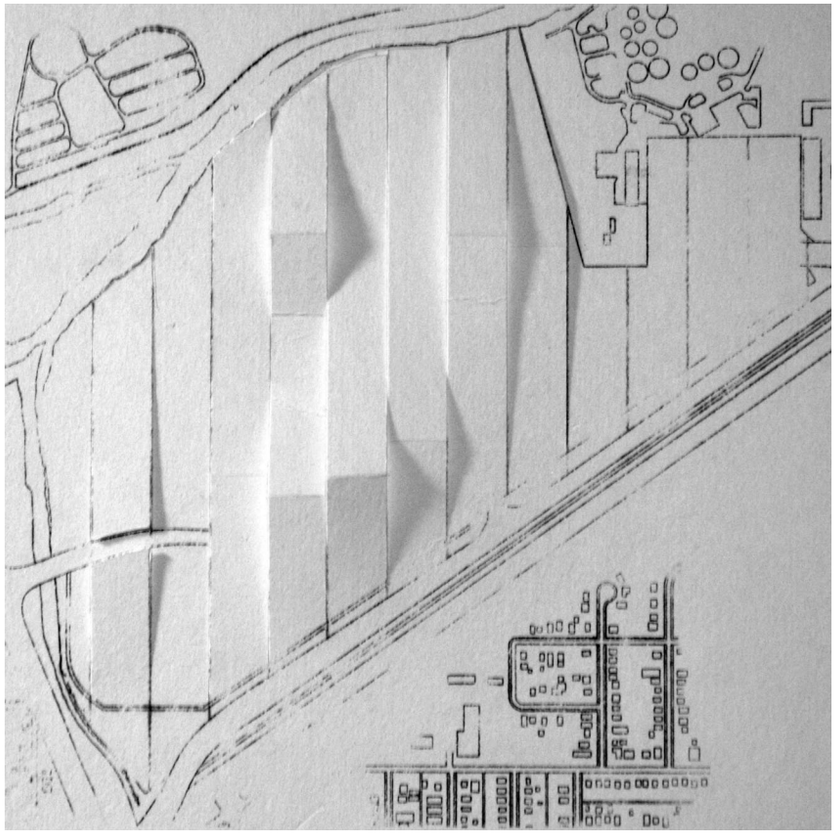


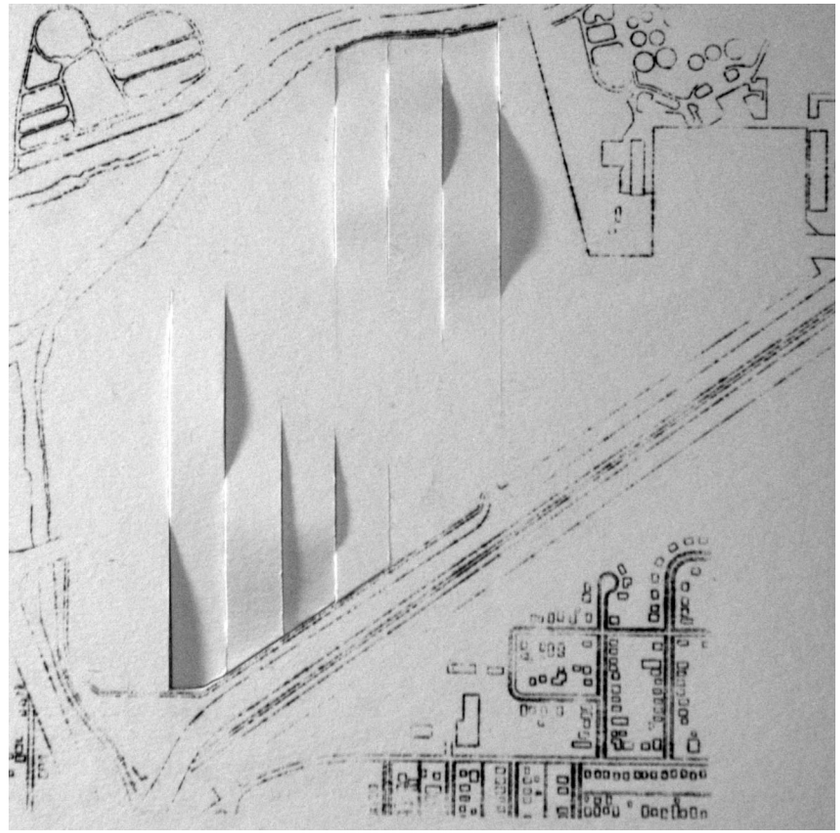
If the entire landscape were enclosed, recreational activities could take place year-round and unnecessary buildings could be eliminated.



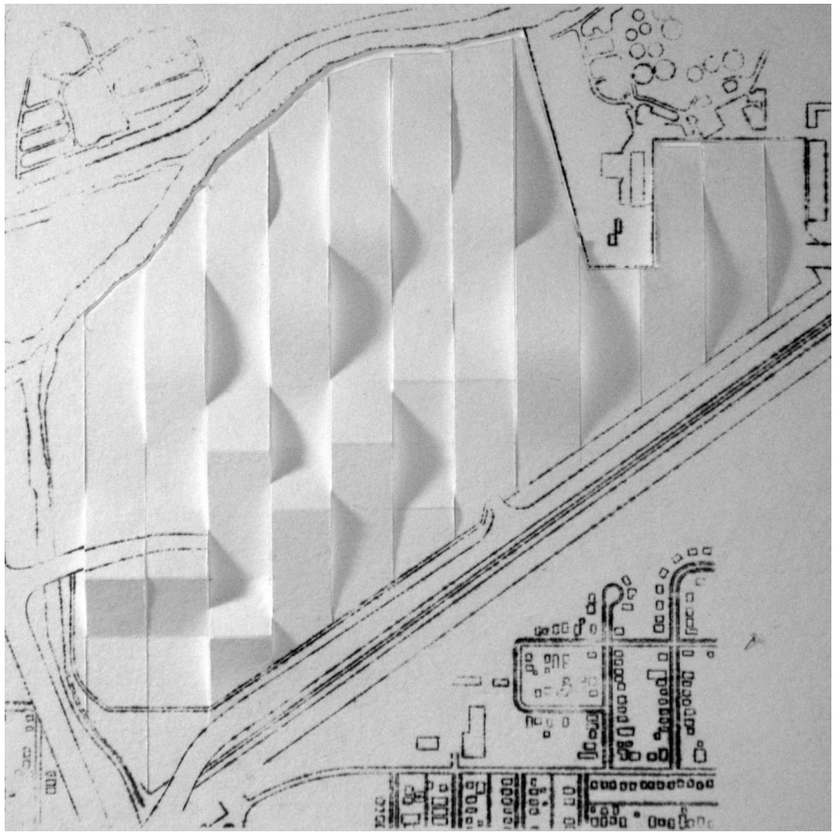
The second concept for an intervention was to elevate the midway on a bridge-like platform. This would lend visual prominence to the midway and accentuate the liveliest part of the fair. Activities could take place above and below the platform, which would double as an enclosure for the administration and rental spaces.

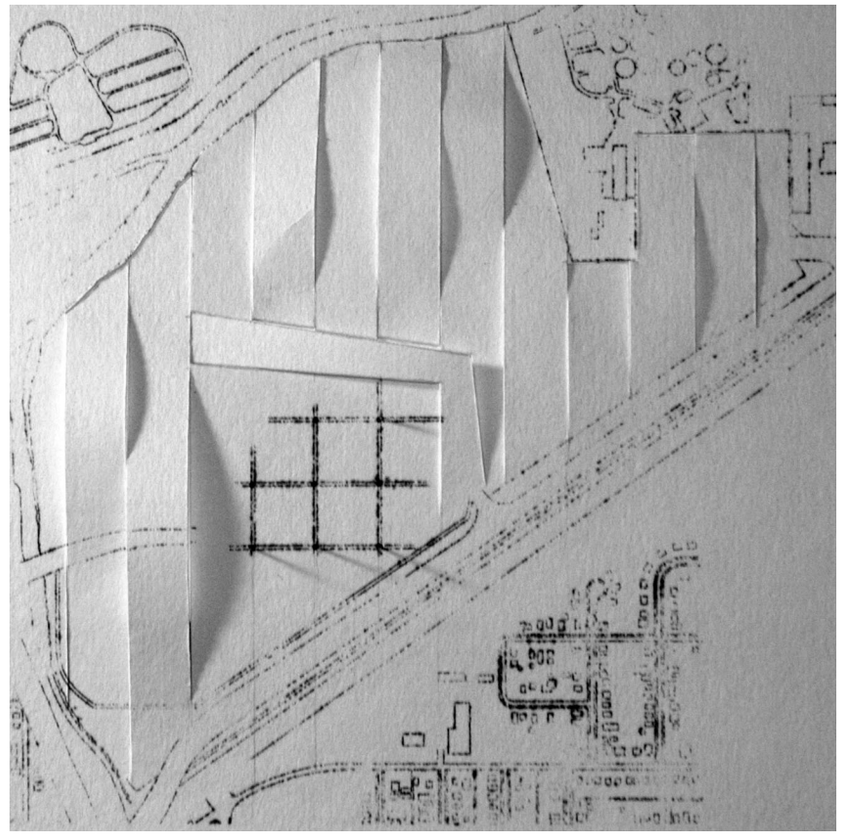
Concept image: Lights of the midway as seen from downtown Lincoln.



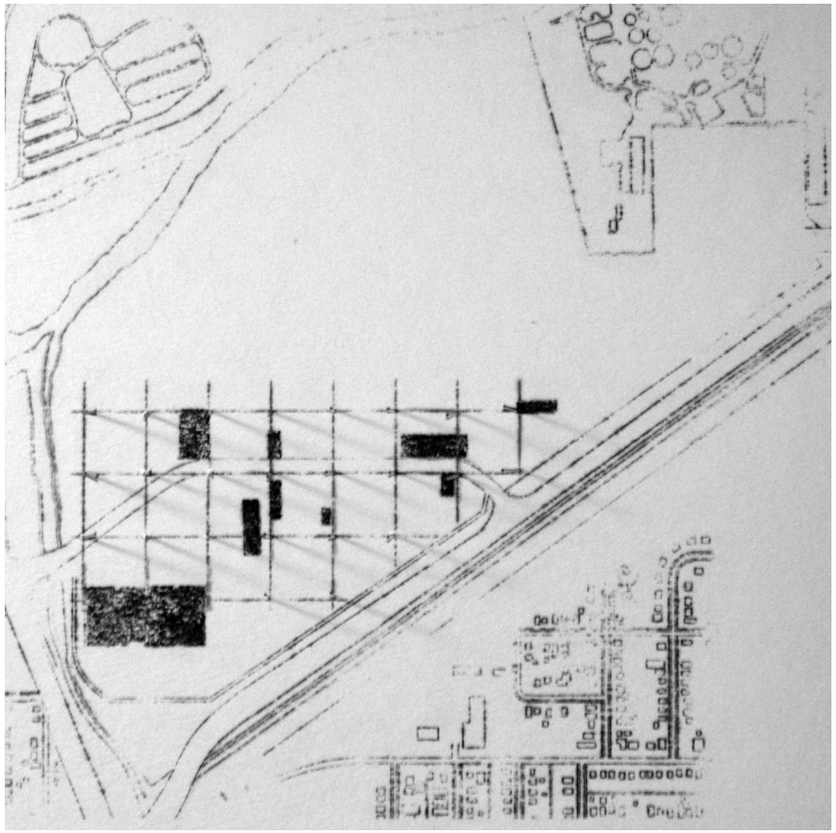


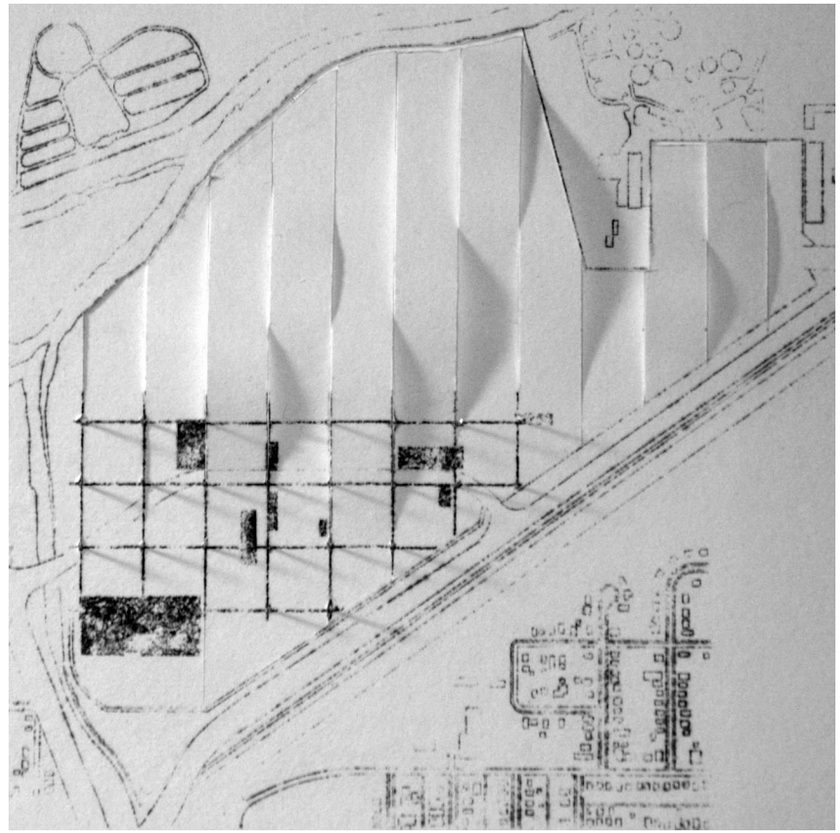
Ventilated drawings with folded strips of land.



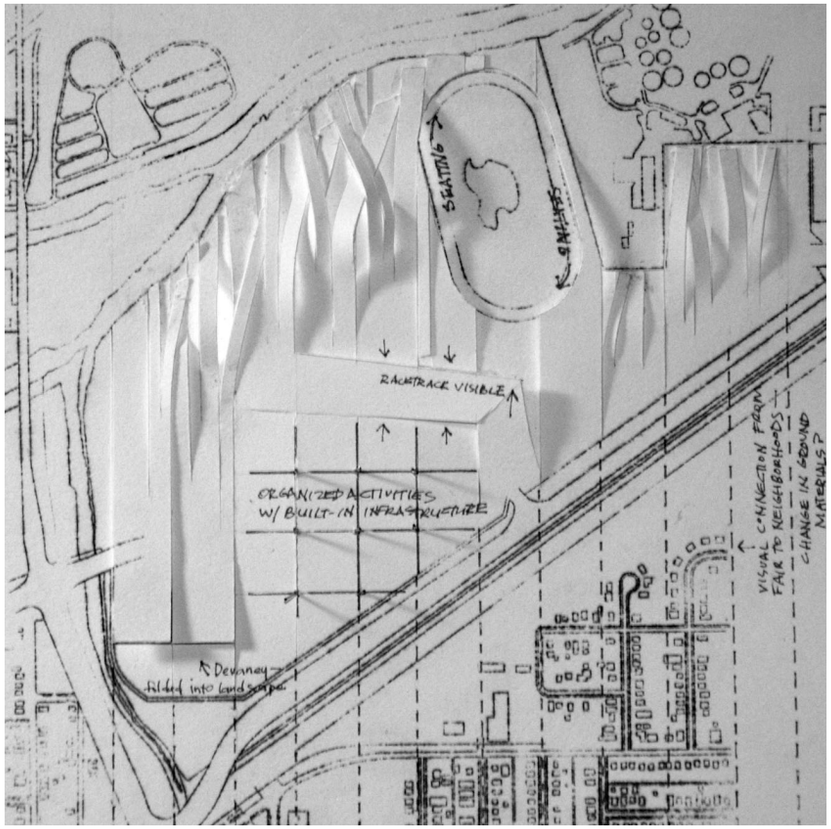


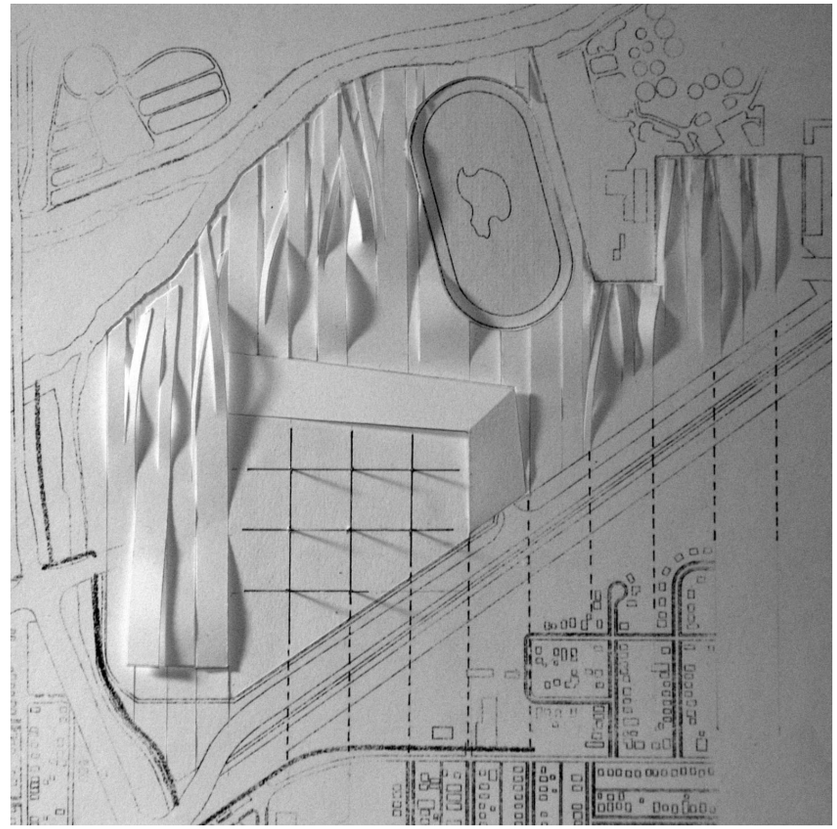
On the left, the previous drawings are combined to create a landscape of rolling hills and sharper peaks. The ventilated drawing on the right shows the elevated midway with a street grid to the south and rolling hills to the north.





In this set of drawings, all buildings are eliminated except the ones that are used consistently throughout the year. A flexible infrastructure, organized on the city grid, could be filled in as needed for various activities.





The final ventilated drawings show more detail and organization. The area south of the platform is organized by a grid, while the rest of the landscape takes a more organic form. Strips of land are pulled over the Bob Devaney Center, and the grandstand seating is tucked into a hill that runs along the racetrack.

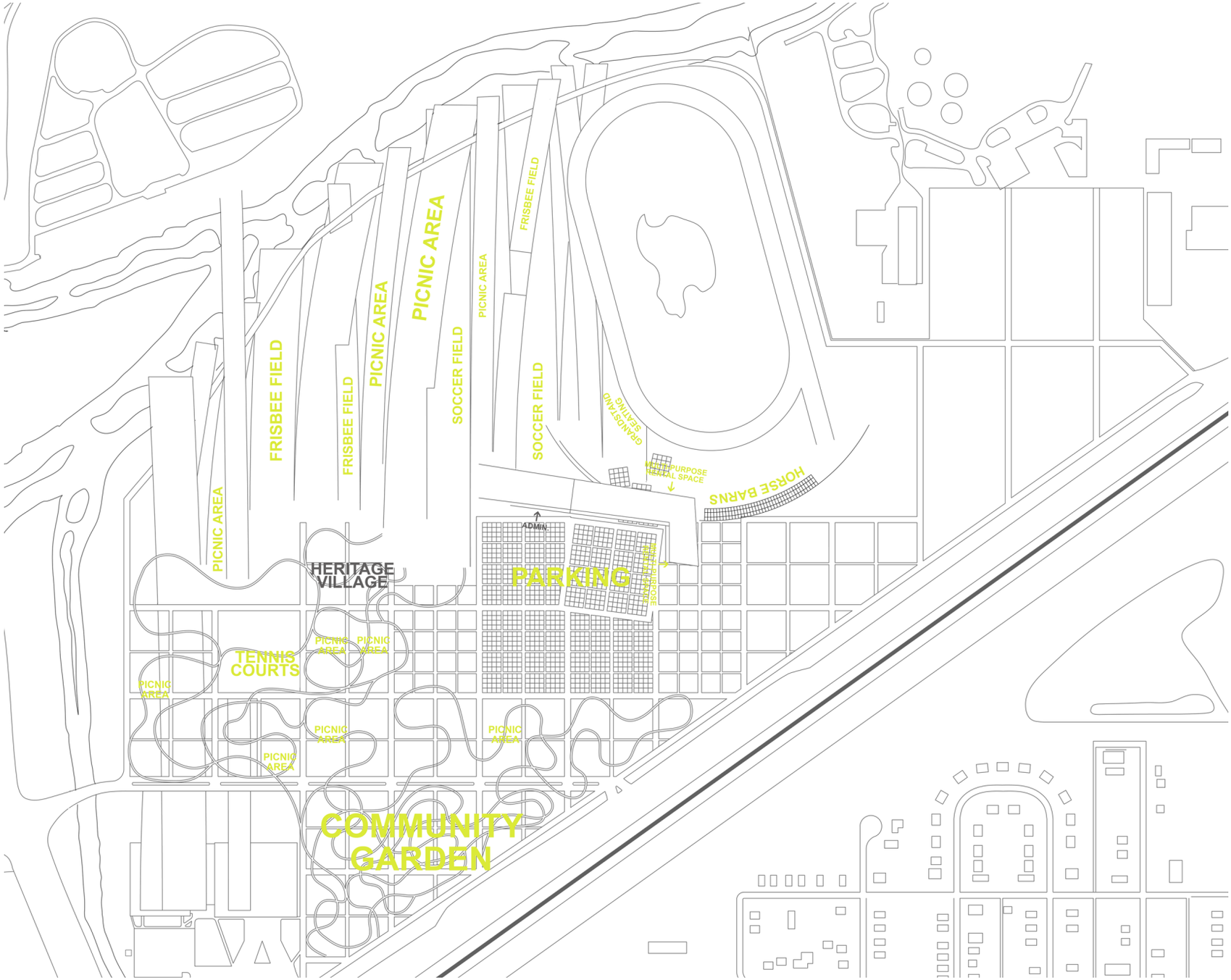
Several possible tree scenarios for the park. Trees are arranged to compliment the plan, both functionally and aesthetically.

In the final comprehensive solution for the Nebraska State Fair Park, the bridge-like platform is the most prominent feature of the landscape. Both on- and off-season activities are concentrated above, below or near the platform, which merges seamlessly with the ground as if a natural extension of the landscape. All buildings have been eliminated, except for the Bob Devaney Center which holds numerous sporting events throughout the year. The new enclosed spaces are treated as *landscape*, rather than *buildings on* the landscape. Activities requiring enclosure are condensed to a smaller area and now occupy the space beneath the platform, which is nearly 1,000 feet long and 170 feet wide. For the enclosures needed during the State Fair, such as animal barns and arenas, simple temporary structures will be erected.

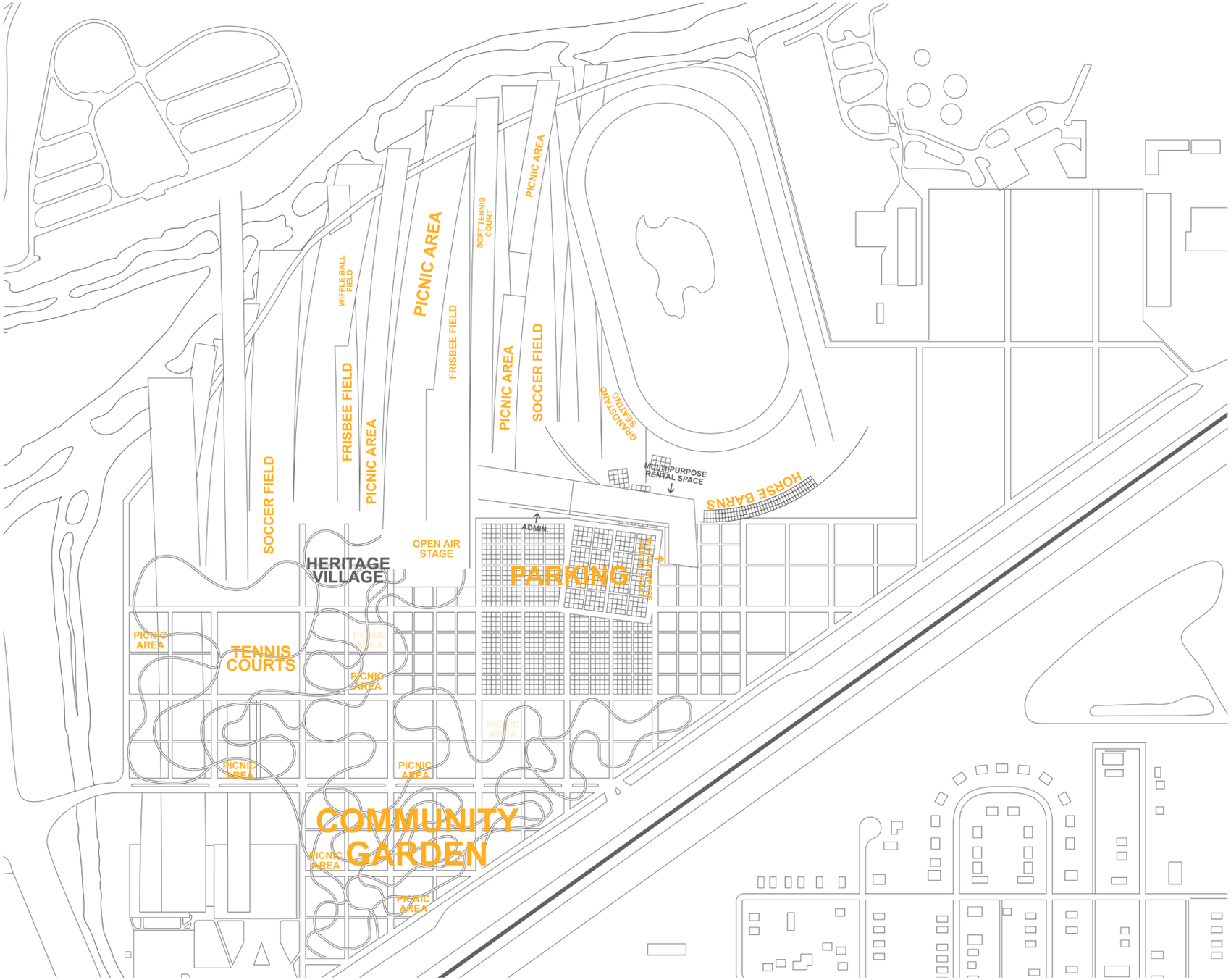
South of the platform, the landscape is organized by a street grid proportional to the surrounding residential neighborhoods. Meandering footpaths overlay the grid, and are distinguished by their organic shape and material. North of the platform, the landscape is divided by narrow, undulating strips of land that become increasingly disordered as they move towards the creek. They range in width from 90 feet to 180 feet, and provide anchoring for a range of leisure activities. Several of the strips rise from the ground to cover the north side of the Bob Devaney Center, masking its appearance from within the park.

The result is a park that welcomes visitors throughout the year—no longer a forbidding landscape of abandoned buildings and desolate parking lots. The park can be seen as a single, fluid landscape that provides just enough organization to support numerous year-round functions, from Husker parking and tailgating to the State Fair.

A visitor to the park in the off-season will find a dynamic landscape of rolling hills, open fields and shaded nooks. One can move over, through and around the “buildings,” and nothing appears to be off-limits. The new comprehensive plan not only provides an efficient, functional ifrastructure for the Nebraska State Fair, but also encourages consistent use throughout the year.


PICNIC AREA
FRISBEE FIELD
FRISBEE FIELD
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA
SOCCER FIELD
PICNIC AREA
FRISBEE FIELD
SOCCER FIELD
GRANDSTAND SEATING
MULTI-PURPOSE INDOOR SPACE
HORSE BARNS
ADMIN.
HERITAGE VILLAGE
PARKING
PARKING
TENNIS COURTS
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA
COMMUNITY GARDEN

Spring.


WIFFLE BALL FIELD
FRISBEE FIELD
SOCCER FIELD
PICNIC AREA
FRISBEE FIELD
PICNIC AREA
SOFT TENNIS COURT
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA
SOCCER FIELD
GRANDSTAND SEATING
MULTIPURPOSE RENTAL SPACE
HORSE BARNS
ADMIN.
OPEN AIR STAGE
HERITAGE VILLAGE
PARKING
PICNIC AREA
TENNIS COURTS
PICNIC AREA
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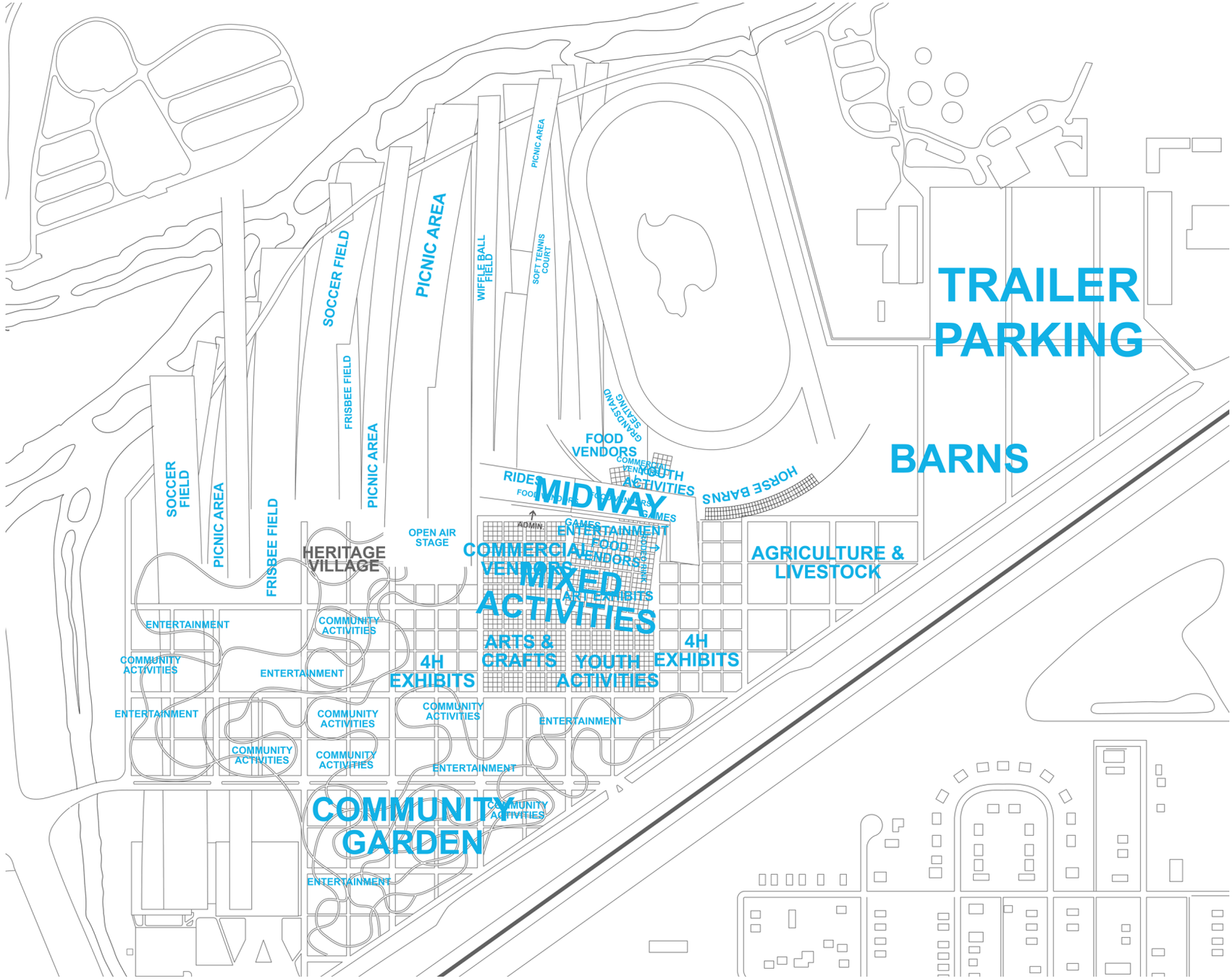
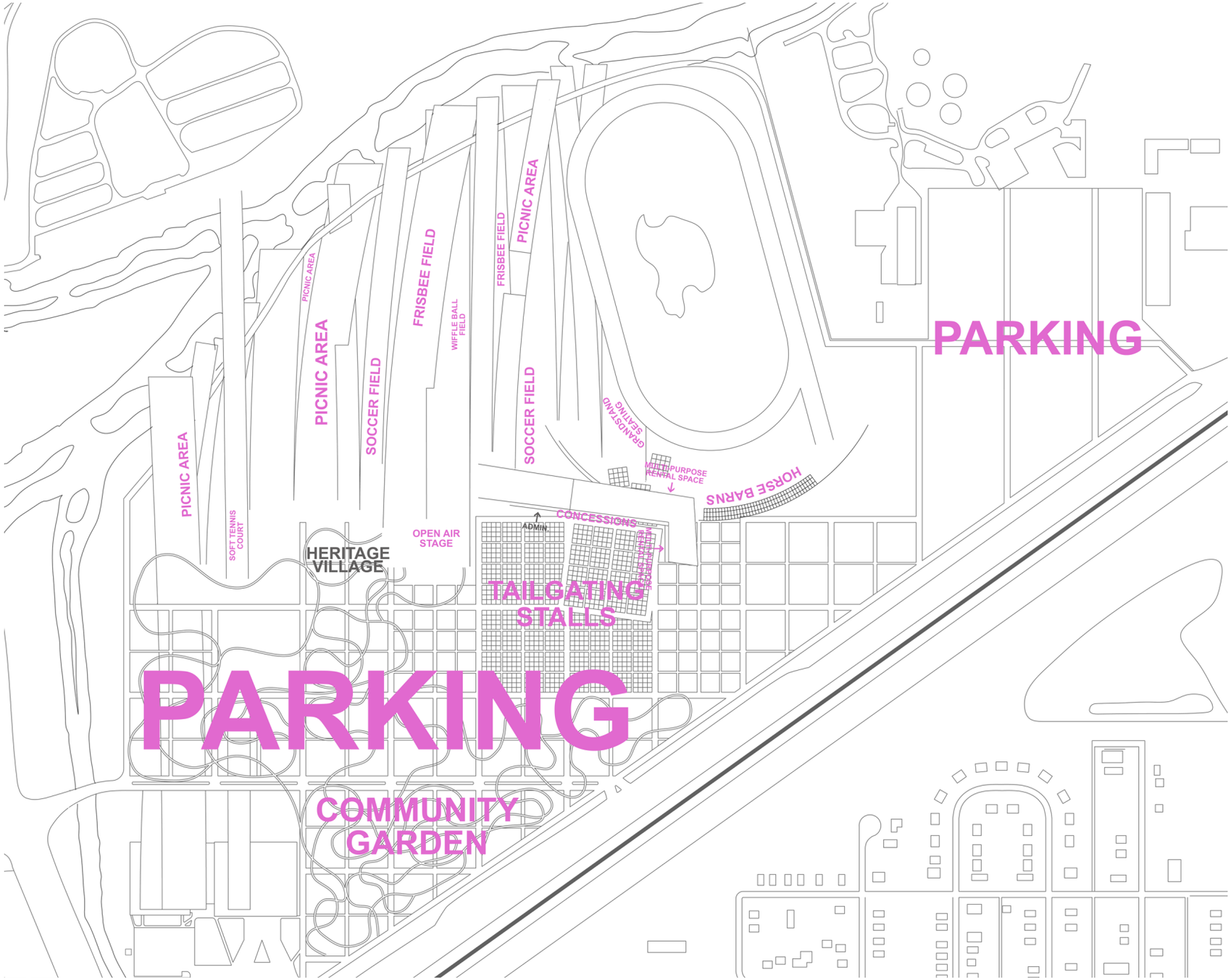
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA
COMMUNITY GARDEN
PICNIC AREA
PICNIC AREA

Summer.



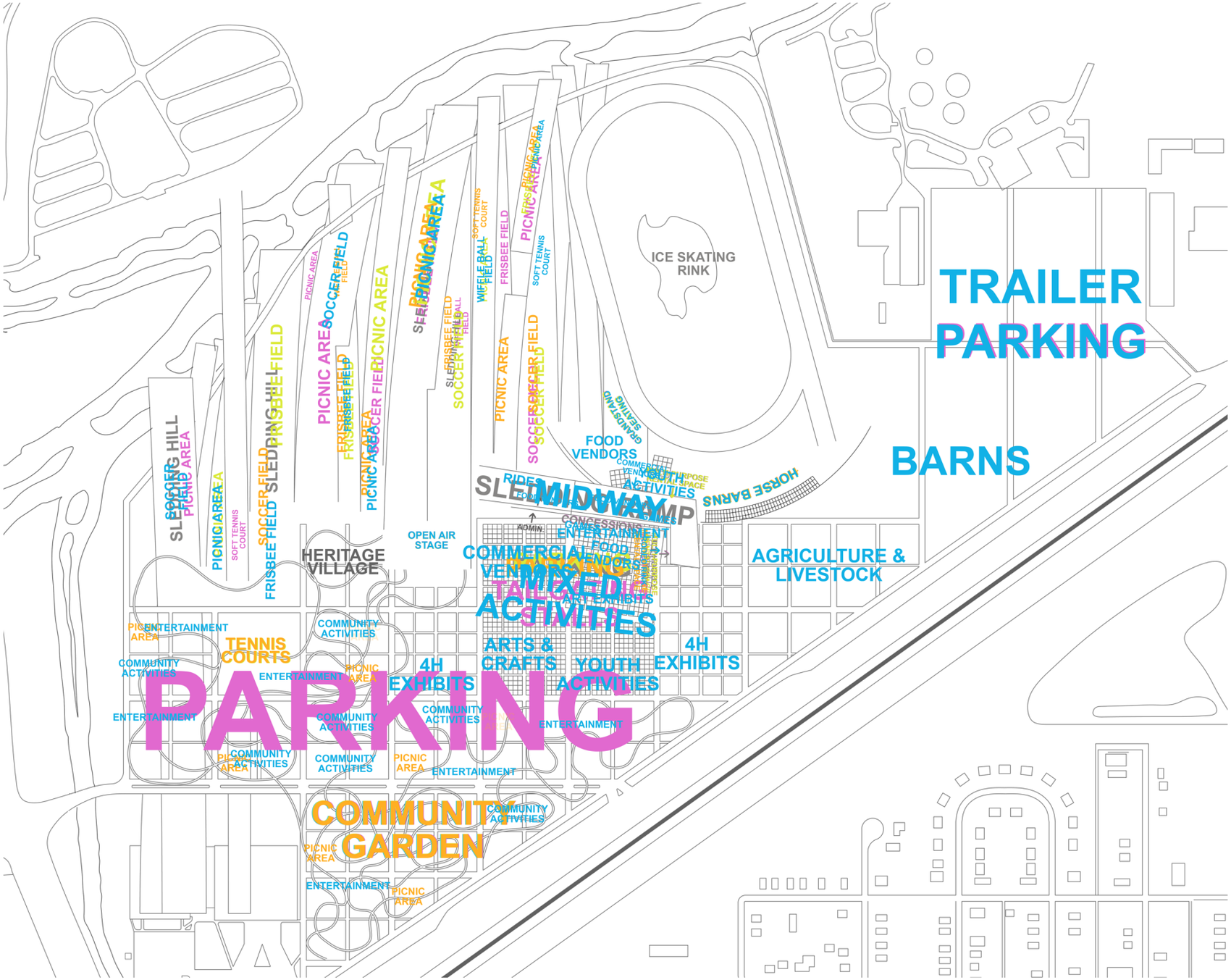
Fall; State Fair.



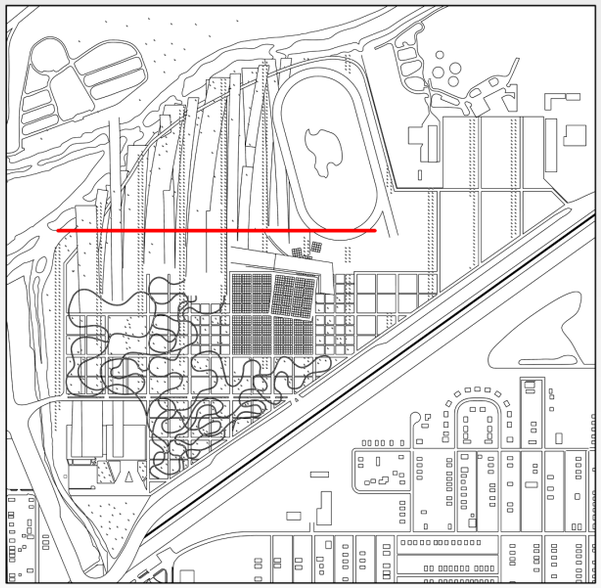
Fall; Husker season.

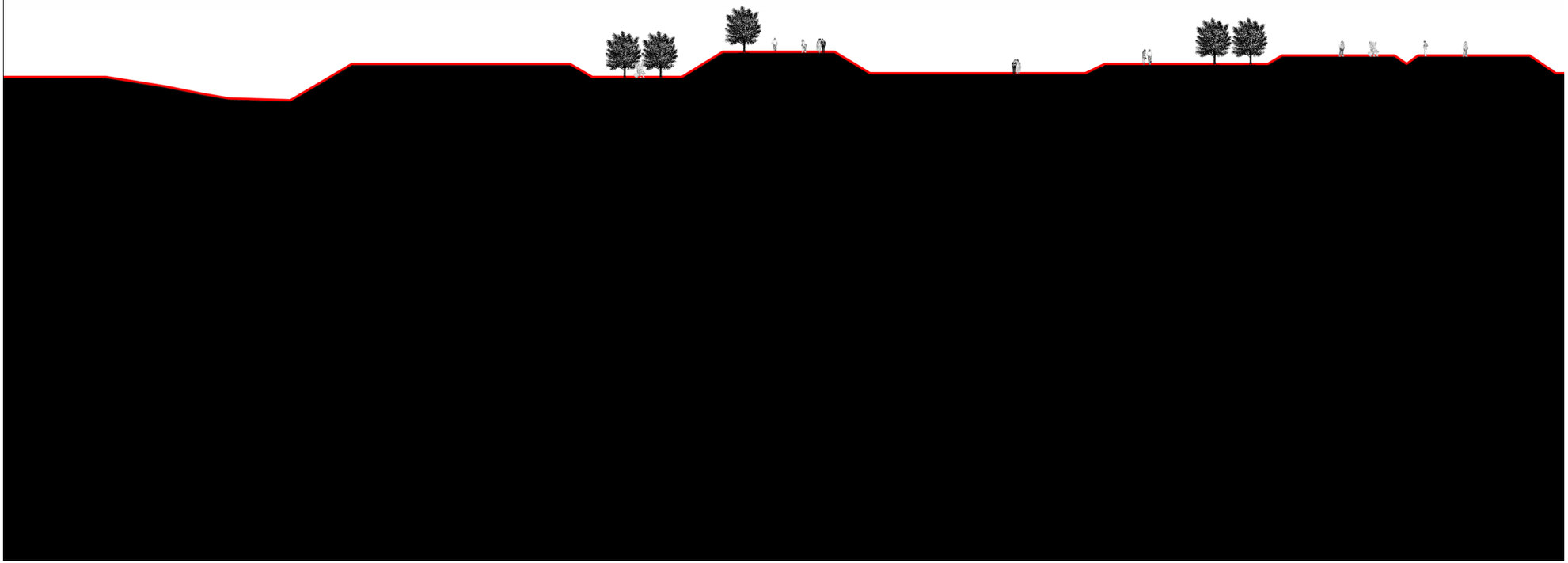

SLEDDING HILL
SLEDDING HILL
SLEDDING HILL
SLEDDING HILL
ICE SKATING RINK
MULTIPURPOSE RENTAL SPACE
SLEDDING RAMP
CONCESSIONS
ADMIN.
HERITAGE VILLAGE
PARKING
TOBOGGAN

Winter.



Year-round activities, layered.





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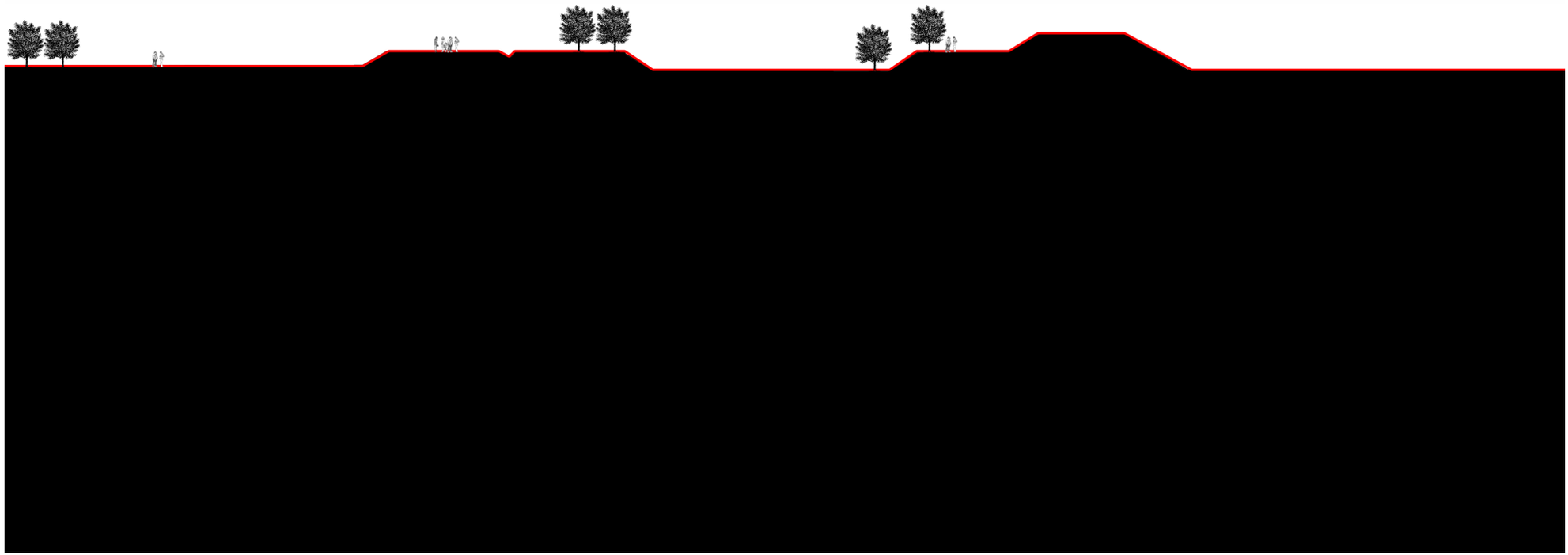

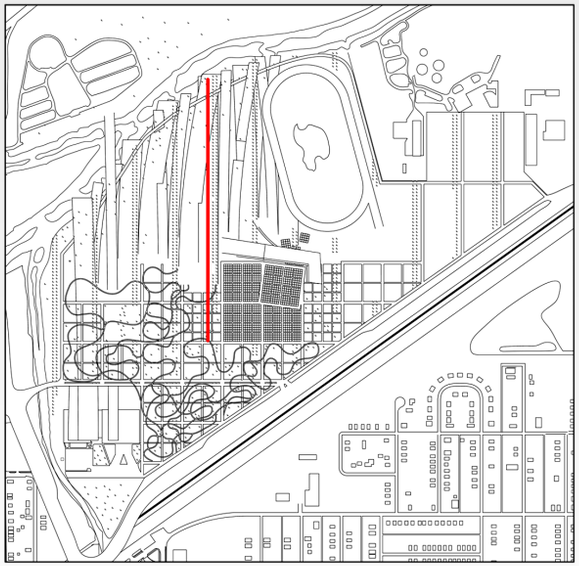

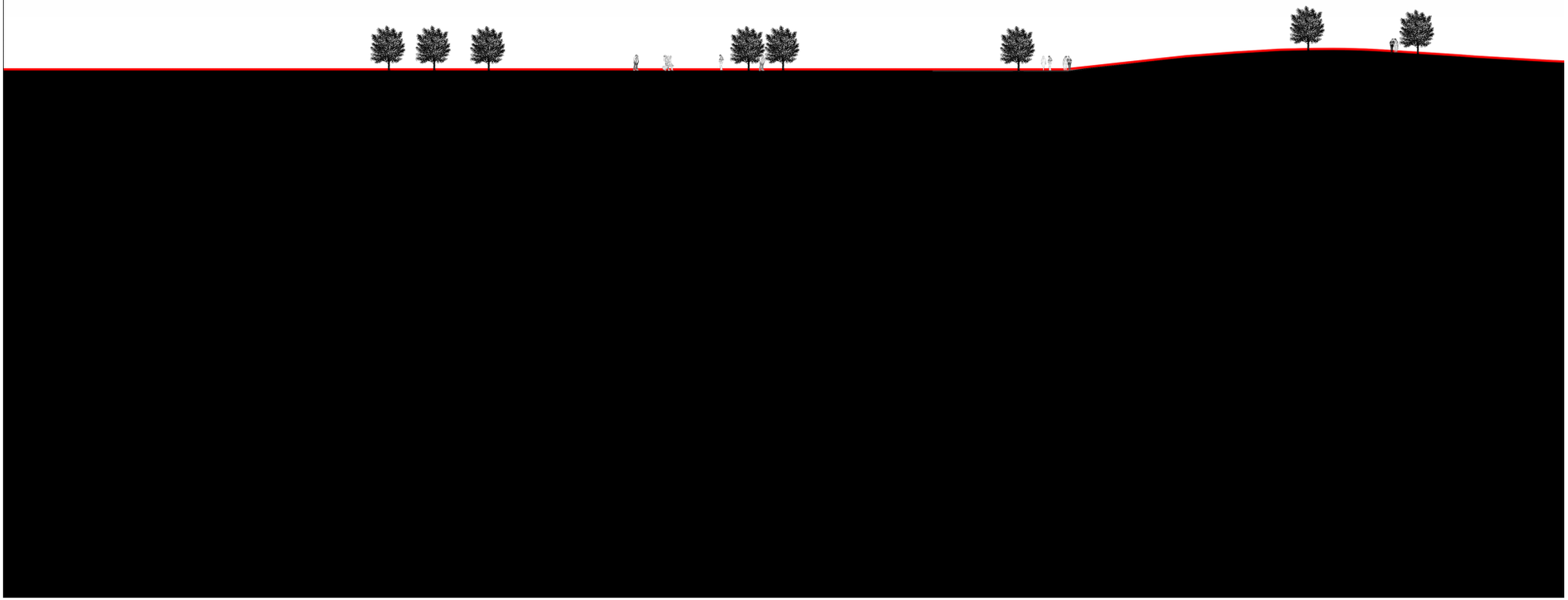

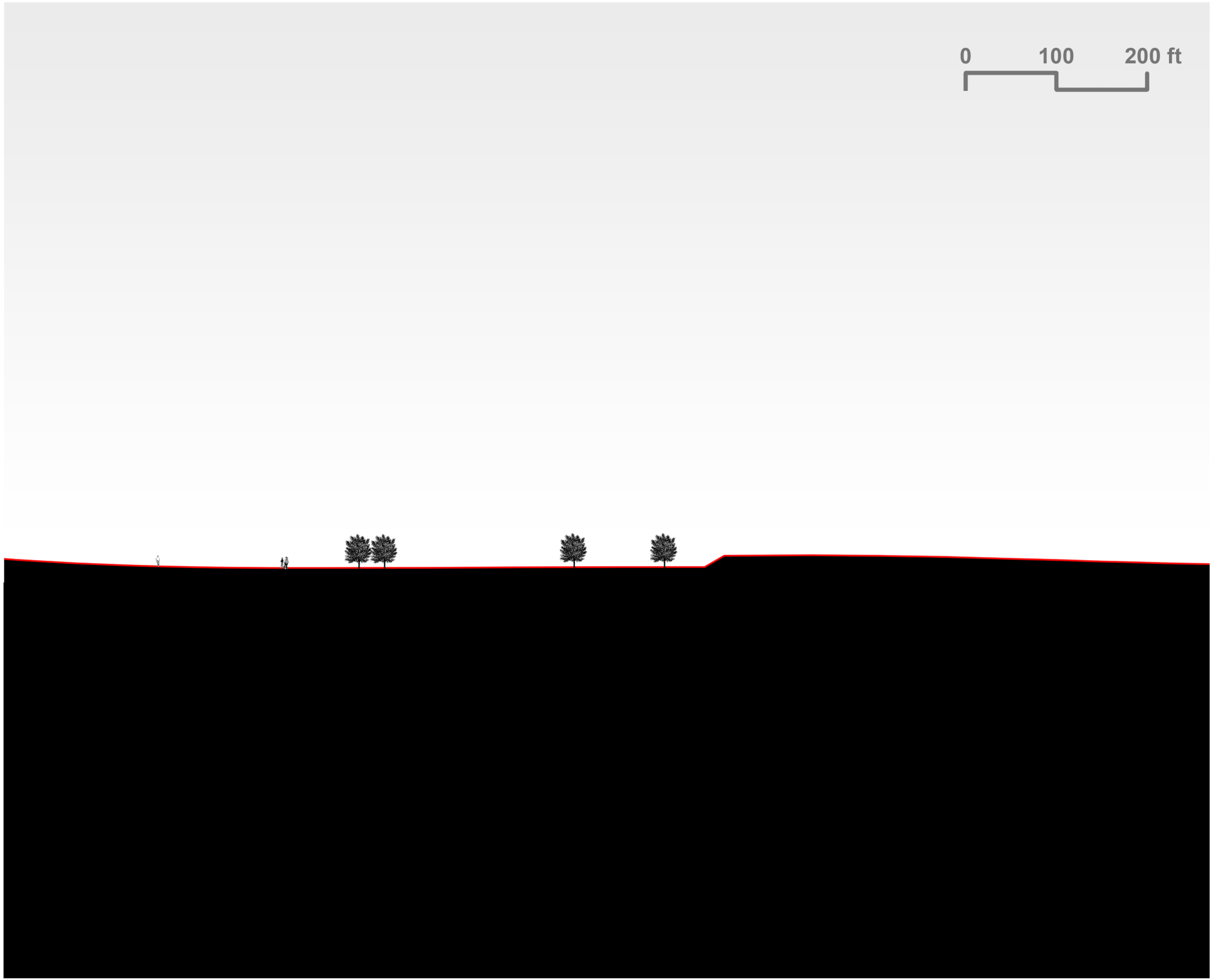
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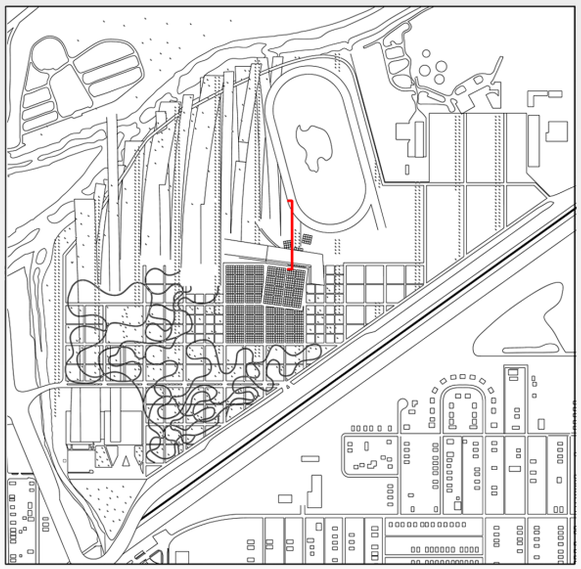

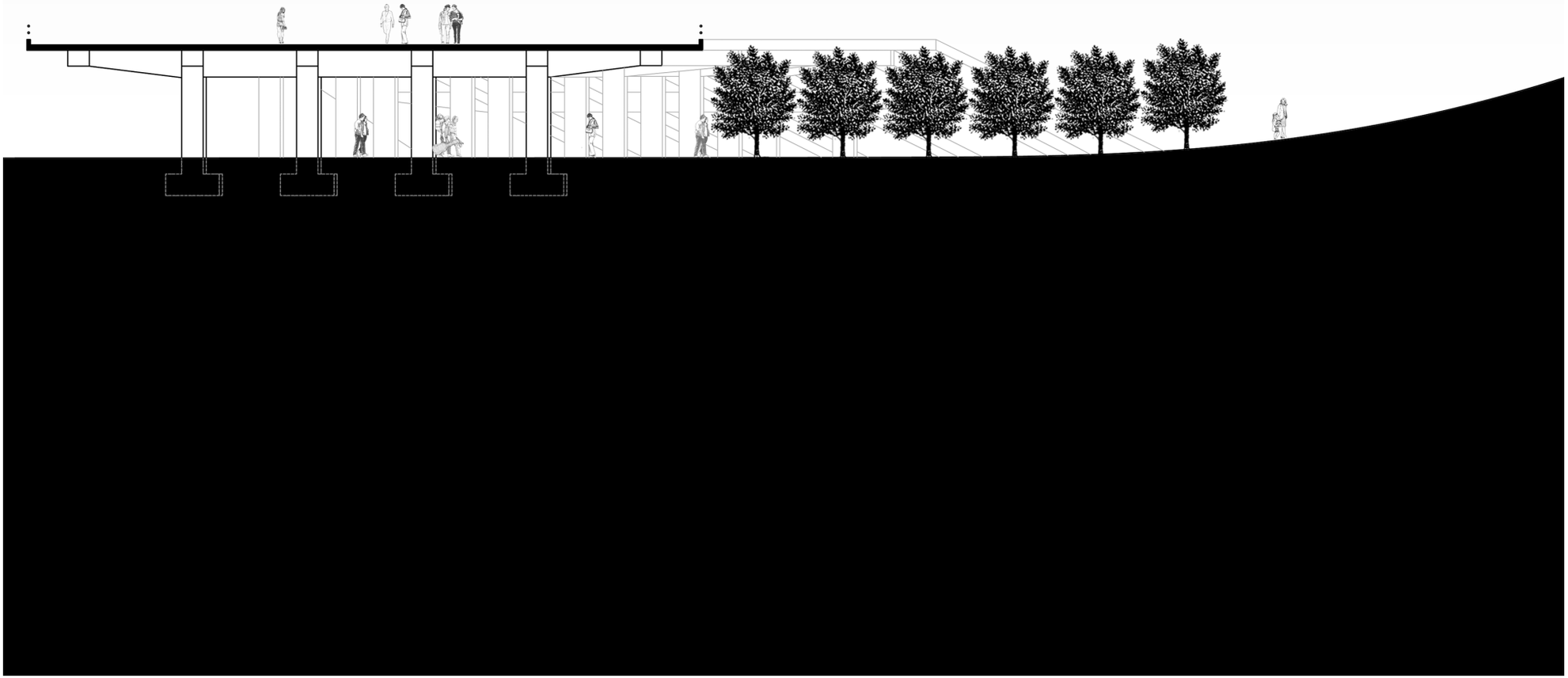

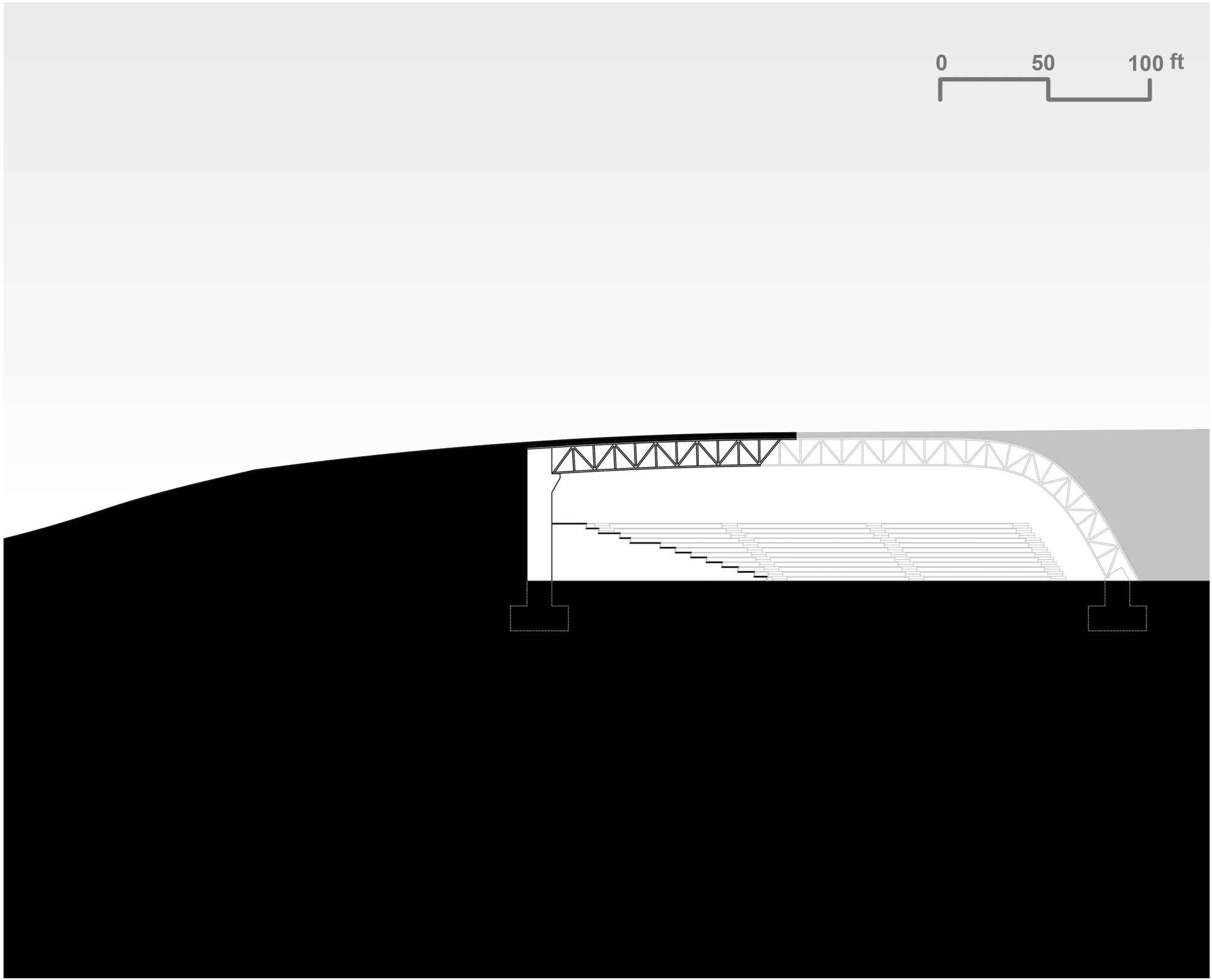
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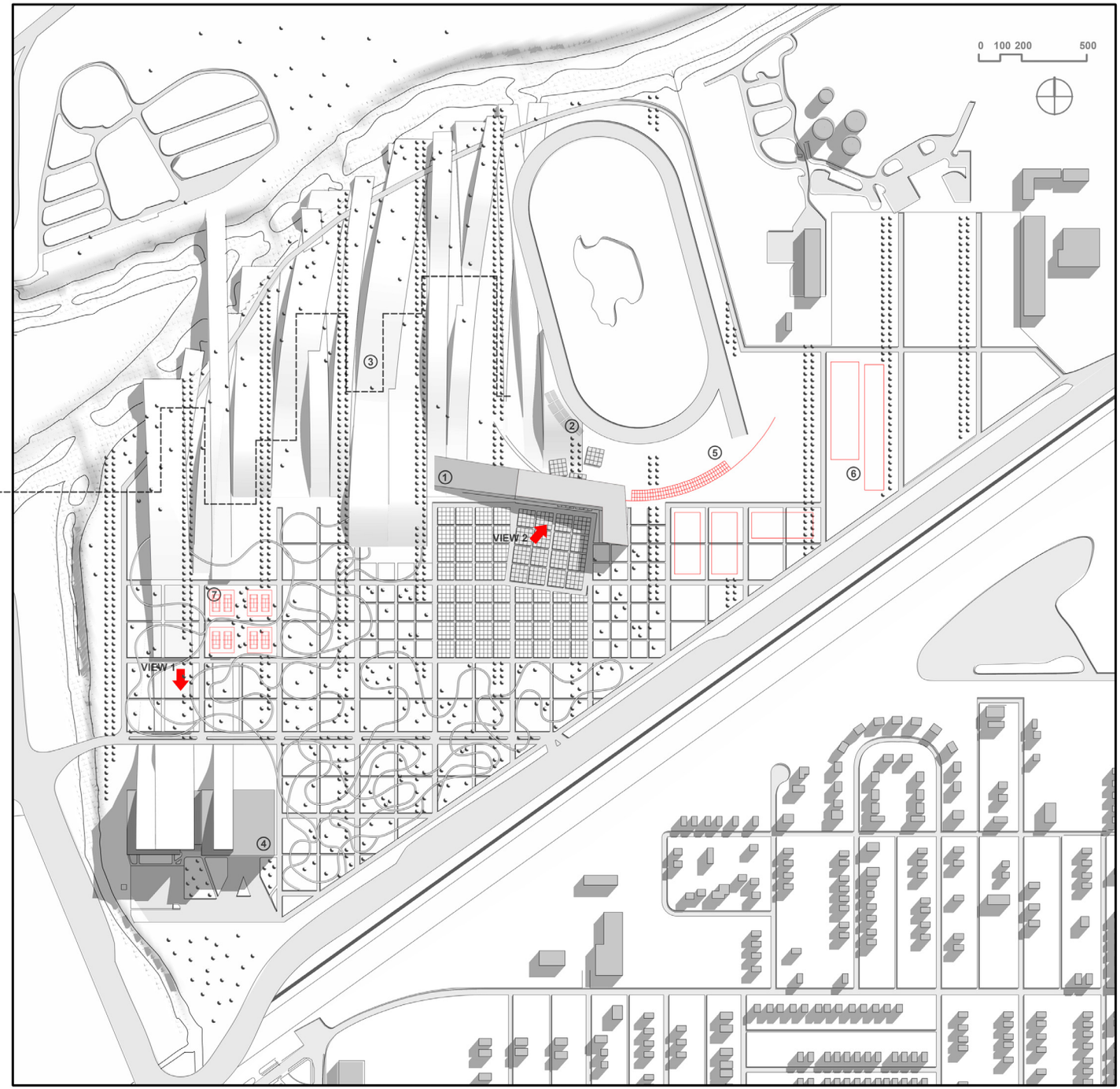
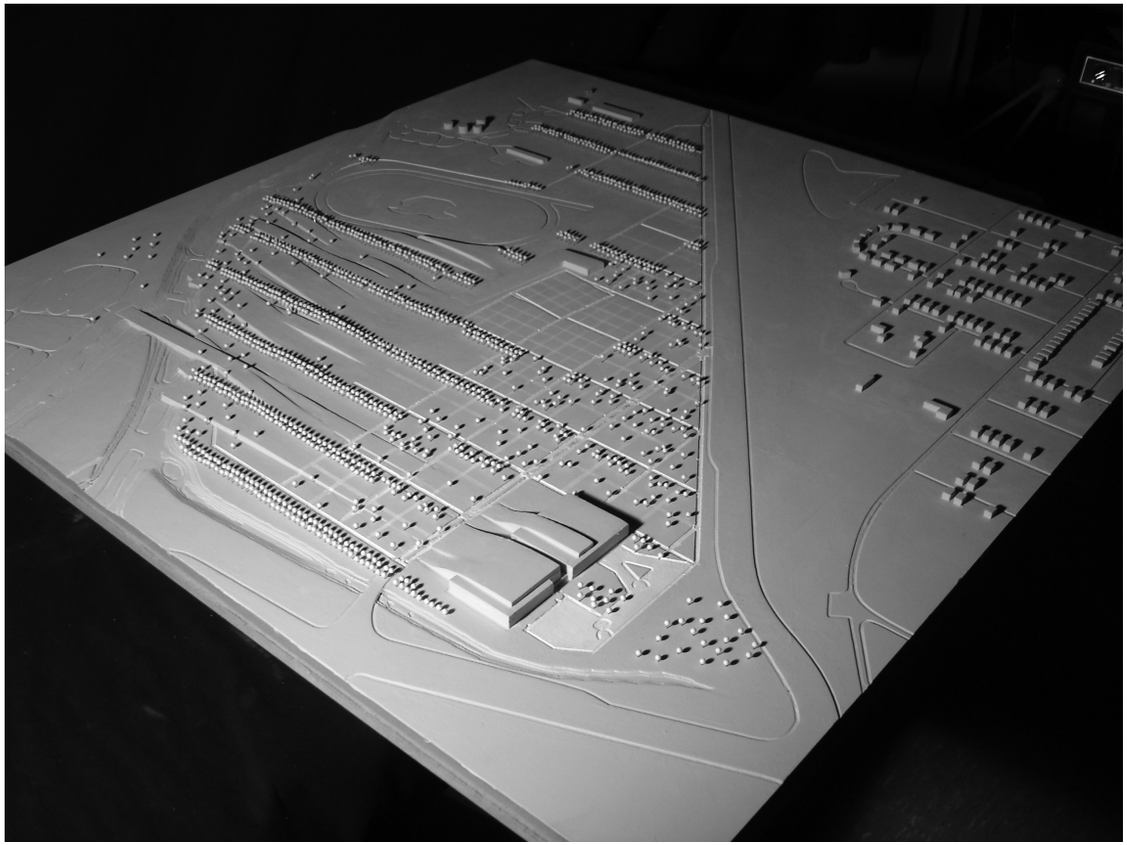
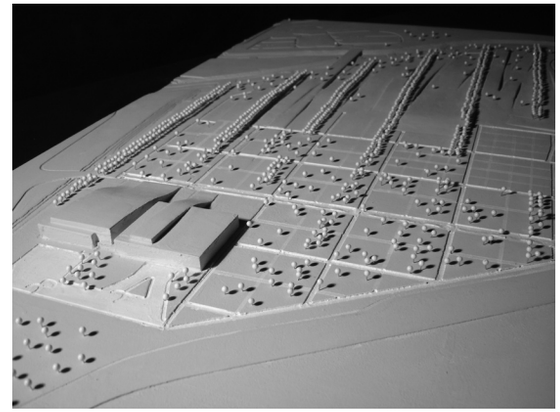
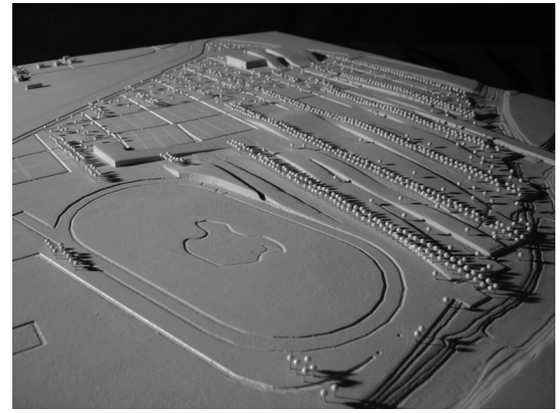


1 PLATFORM 2 GRANDSTAND SEATING 3 MANIPULATED LANDSCAPE 4 BOB DEVANEY SPORTS CENTER 5 HORSE BARNS 6 TEMPORARY BARNS 7 TENNIS COURTS

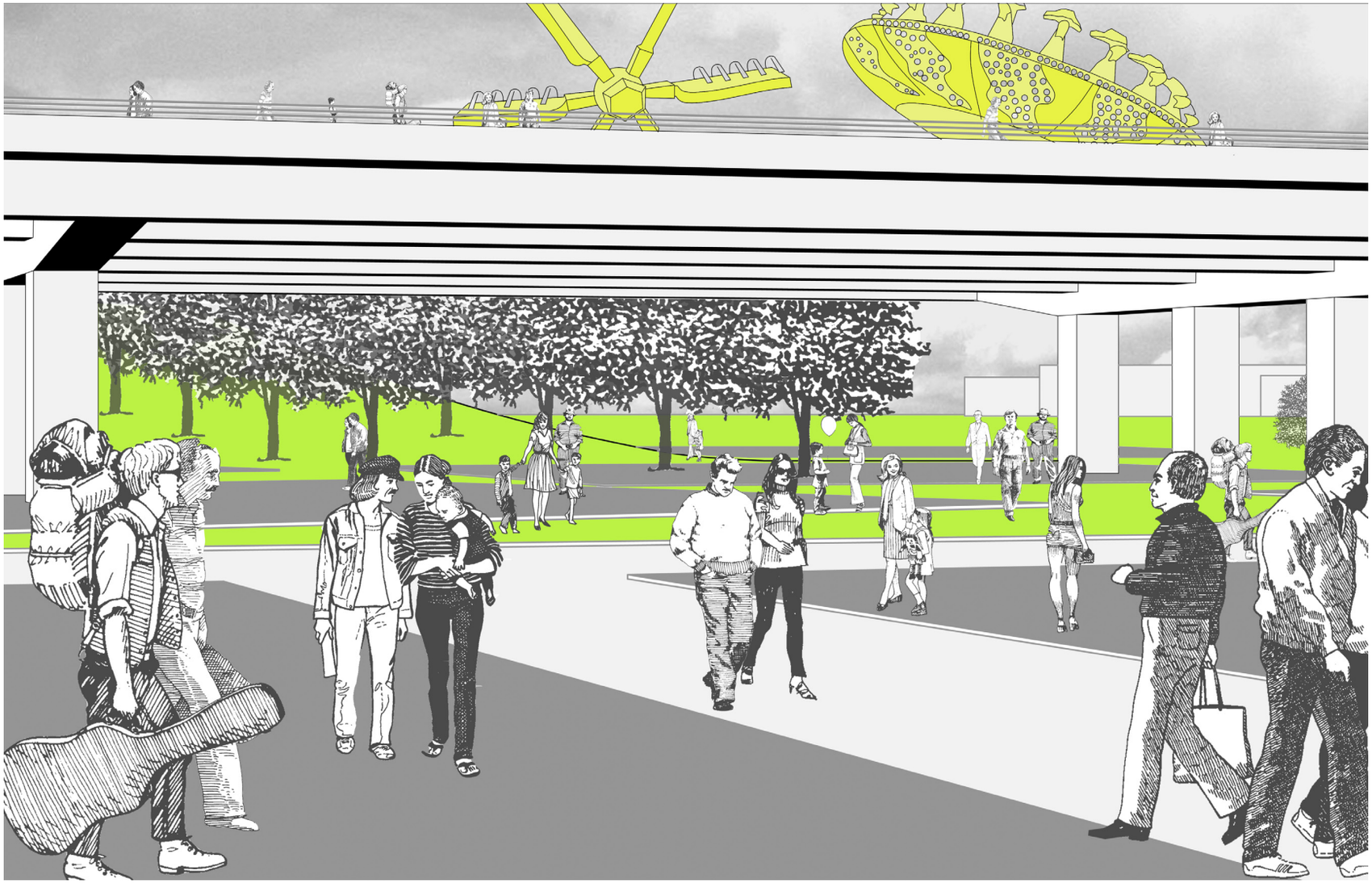






Physical model.

View 1. Looking south towards the Bob Devaney Center.



View 2. Below the midway.

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